

Massive Delta Airlines computer failure creates worldwide havoc

Shannon Jones
9 August 2016

A computer outage led Delta Airlines, the second largest air carrier in the US, to cancel hundreds of flights internationally Monday. Although the problem appeared to be resolved by the afternoon, the impact of the problem continued to cascade through the international transportation system, causing delays worldwide.

There is currently no detailed explanation for the breakdown. Delta blamed a power failure in Atlanta where its headquarters are located. A spokesman for Georgia Power said the shutdown was caused by the failure of a piece of equipment called a switchgear.

A Georgia Power spokesman told the *New York Times*, “We believe that Delta Air Lines experienced an equipment failure overnight that caused their outage. ... We are working closely with the team at Delta as they repair that equipment.”

The chaos caused by the computer malfunction is a product of the absurdity of the capitalist profit system, where four major airlines and about a dozen smaller rivals compete for air service in the United States. In response to the breakdown at Delta there appears to have been no serious effort by other airlines to step in and help reroute the stranded passengers, who were by and large left to fend for themselves, as were stranded pilots and flight crews.

In relation to the outage itself, at this time it is difficult to sort through the competing accusations of malfeasance and incompetence. There does not appear to be an issue of sabotage or outside computer hacking involved.

An electrical engineer with the local Atlanta-based power company contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* said, “Each company will try to blame the other. Georgia Power is saying it had something to do with Delta’s equipment. They insist that other companies in

the area did not lose power.

“I am pretty positive it wasn’t a power outage. There were no storms in the area. According to Delta it happened at 2:38 a.m., an outage is unlikely to happen at that time. It generally happens during periods of peak loads, for example around 5 p.m. in the afternoon.

“Many times big companies will own their own electrical equipment. They get their power in bulk from a transmission line and then it has to be stepped down using transformers.

“Switchgear is a general term. They probably mean a circuit breaker. It is just like a big fuse. It is not clear who owns the transformers or the switchgears involved.”

According to a report by Reuters, “The carrier was probably running a routine test of its backup power supplies when the switchgear failed and locked Delta out of its reserve generators as well as from Georgia Power ... That would result in a shutdown of Delta’s data center, which controls bookings, flight operations and other critical systems...”

Even if a power system failure on the part of Georgia Power is isolated as the cause, it does not remove responsibility from Delta for failing to have a functional backup power supply. US power systems, for the most part privately run, are notoriously prone to failure as workers in most urban areas can testify.

The system-wide breakdown points to a broader neglect of infrastructure on the part of airline management. It appears likely that in the wake of Delta’s merger with Northwest, the different computer systems have still not been synchronized. According to one travel expert, some airlines are still running systems dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

The computer failure at Delta follows a similar breakdown at Southwest Airlines last month that led to

the cancellation of more than 1,000 flights. The continuing problems point to a number of failures, including poor planning and the lack of adequate backup systems.

Computers handle all facets of airline operations, including scheduling, ticketing, flight tracking and reservations. As the systems take on more and more functions they become more complex and interconnected. Thus, a problem in one area can have an impact throughout the network.

It is not as though Delta is not flush with cash to deal with such issues. The equipment breakdown comes at a time when Delta and other major airlines are experiencing a boom in profits, due to relatively low fuel prices. Delta's net income for the second quarter of 2016, \$1.55 billion, was up 4 percent from a year ago.

The same day as the Delta computer failure, Southwest Airlines flight attendants at nine airports set up informational pickets to protest deteriorating working conditions. Audrey Stone, president of the Transport Workers Union, the bargaining agent for the flight attendants, cited the recent near shutdown of Southwest Airlines, due to the computer failure, as one of many contributing issues leading to falling employee morale. "Over the past several years, Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly and COO Mike Van de Ven have failed to recognize and adequately fix the operational failures that continue to plague our airline, including our flight attendant contract. Our flight attendants, along with other frontline employees, end up bearing the brunt of these failures."

During the Southwest shutdown thousands of crew members were left stranded, with no hotel rooms to accommodate them.

Meanwhile, some 12,800 Delta pilots are seeking a 40 percent compounded pay increase to compensate for concessions they surrendered when the company went into bankruptcy in 2005. The pilots rejected a tentative contract negotiated by the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) last July by a 65 percent margin. It provided for an inadequate pay increase of an immediate 8 percent followed by 6 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent over the next three years. The proposal would have reduced profit sharing and imposed a new, draconian, sick leave policy as well as work-rule changes.

Last month ALPA opened a strike center in Atlanta.

The union said the move was to coordinate activities should a strike become necessary. Federal law places severe restrictions on the right of airline employees to strike. To reach a legal strike position, workers must navigate a series of steps including mediation. Further, the US president can issue an order blocking a strike under provisions of the Railway Labor Act.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact