Video showing police dragging passenger from United Airlines flight sparks outrage

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Smartphone videos shot by passengers on a United Airlines flight showing a man being violently dragged from the plane Sunday evening quickly went viral on social media Monday, provoking widespread outrage against the airline and police. On Facebook, one of the videos of the disturbing incident was viewed nearly 9 million times in a little over 24 hours.

The United flight had been scheduled to depart Chicago's O'Hare International Airport for Louisville, Kentucky, at 5:40 p.m. Sunday. However, United sought to bump several passengers from the flight, a practice which has become ubiquitous in the airline industry and a frequent source of stress and anxiety for travelers.

United staff initially said the flight was overbooked and offered those boarding a $400 voucher if they chose to voluntarily be bumped from the flight. When no one took the offer, employees then told passengers that four people would need to disembark in order for the plane to leave, and the voucher was raised to $800. It was also revealed that United was seeking to use the seats in order to transport four of its off-duty staff to their next shift.

After no one took the final "voluntary" offer, four passengers were selected, seemingly arbitrarily, to be forced from the flight. Three of them left reluctantly, while the fourth refused, telling staff that he was a doctor and had patients to see in Louisville in the morning.

Police were then called on to the plane, several in uniform and one in plainclothes. Videos of the incident begin with the officers standing around the man, who is sitting quietly. Within moments, two of the cops grab the man, who begins screaming, as do other passengers. He is ripped from his seat and shoved face-first into one of the hard plastic armrests.

As the plainclothes officer drags the man, now limp and bleeding from the mouth, up the aisle, a woman nearby shouts, "No, this is wrong! What are you doing? Look at what you did to him!"

Another video indicates that the man seemingly attempted to get back to his seat sometime later. It shows him dazed and disheveled, jogging up the aisle and repeating, "I have to go home, I have to go home, I have to go home."

The man, who has not yet been identified but was revealed to be 69 years old by the Chicago Police Department, was taken to Advocate Lutheran Hospital in nearby Park Ridge, Illinois. The plane eventually departed for Louisville, two hours late.

Tyler Bridges, one of those who shot footage of the event, wrote that the video "felt like something the world needed to see."

Initial statements by United displayed a callous indifference to the man's well-being and only fueled more indignation. On Sunday, the company wrote in a statement, "After our team looked for volunteers, one customer refused to leave the aircraft voluntarily and law enforcement was asked to come to the gate. We apologize for the overbook situation. Further details on the removed customer should be directed to authorities."

Charlie Hobart, a spokesman for the company, told the *New York Times,* "We had asked several times, politely" for the man to leave. "Since that customer refused to leave the aircraft, we had to call" law enforcement.

United's CEO, Oscar Munoz, first sought to present a more contrite image to the public, calling it an "upsetting event," while nevertheless only apologizing for "having to re-accommodate these customers."

However, in a letter to employees which was leaked

to the press, Munoz castigated the man as "disruptive and belligerent," and sought to raise suspicions over his motivation, writing that "the facts and circumstances are still evolving, especially with respect to why this customer defied Chicago Aviation Security Officers the way he did…"

As the letter indicated, police who were called to the plane operate under the aegis of the Chicago Department of Aviation, not the Chicago Police Department. The Department of Aviation sought to carry out its own damage control Monday, saying that one of the officers involved had been placed on leave "pending a thorough review of the situation," and that "The incident on United flight 3411 was not in accordance with our standard operating procedure and the actions of the aviation security officer are obviously not condoned by the Department."

A Chicago Police Department statement, on the other hand, predictably sought to blame the victim of the police's abuse, stating that the man was "irate" and "yelling to voice his displeasure." Blatantly contradicting the scene depicted in multiple videos, they claimed that the officers "attempted to carry the individual off of the flight when he fell. His head subsequently struck an armrest causing injuries to his face."

Overbooking, in which carriers sell more tickets than there are seats on the plane, has become widespread throughout the airline industry. Airline companies use the practice in order to pack as many passengers onto each flight as possible, squeezing out every last dollar in profit, regardless of the disruption it causes to travelers.

Industry "load factor," a measure of how full each flight is, has steadily increased to approximately 85 percent, following a low of 72.2 percent in 2009, following the economic crash. There has been a commensurate growth in the number of "bumps" from flights recently, with the number rising to over 500,000 in 2015, with nearly 50,000 being "involuntary," as with Sunday's incident.

United, based in Chicago, earned $2.26 billion in profit in 2016 and is the third-largest airline in the world by revenue, and has raked in billions in recent years due to low fuel prices, attacks on the wages and working conditions of pilots and other airline workers, and monopolistic collusion and price-fixing with the other major airlines. The four largest domestic airlines—American, Delta, United and Southwest—collectively control 80 percent of the US market.