As anger grows against US carriers, Spirit Airlines scapegoats pilots

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In one of the latest widely publicized incidents concerning a US airline, passengers erupted in rage at a Spirit Airlines ticket counter Monday evening after flight cancellations and delays left hundreds stranded at Florida's Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

Several passengers, including those who had waited in line for hours or had been taken off a plane due to a canceled flight, got into angry confrontations with Spirit employees.

Videos that soon went viral showed Broward County sheriff's deputies forcefully handcuffing and arresting passengers. Three travelers awaiting flights to New York were charged with inciting a riot, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest and trespassing, according to police.

The melee in Florida follows last month's brutal assault, also captured on cellphone videos, of 69-year-old Dr. David Dao who was dragged from an over-booked United Airlines flight by airport police in Chicago.

Since then there have been a spate of other high profile incidents, including an altercation between passengers and an American Airlines flight attendant who took a stroller away from a mother with two small children and the expulsion of a Wisconsin man from a Delta flight because he had to use the bathroom.

Spirit Airlines executives immediately blamed the Florida incident on the airlines' pilots. In a statement, company spokesman Paul Berry claimed to be "shocked and saddened" by what had happened but then immediately declared, "This is a result of unlawful labor activity by some Spirit pilots designed to disrupt Spirit operations for our customers, by canceling multiple flights across our network. These pilots have put their quest for a new contract ahead of getting customers to their destinations and the safety of their fellow Spirit Team Members."

Hours before Monday evening's angry eruption, Spirit filed a lawsuit in US district court against the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) alleging that it was "engaged in a pervasive illegal work slowdown that has caused approximately 300 flight cancellations and has disrupted the travel plans of over 20,000 customers, while causing Spirit to incur approximately $8.5 million in lost revenue and irreparable harm to its goodwill with its customers."

The lawsuit charged that pilots were refusing to take assignments during the "open time" left on their monthly work schedules to fill in for other pilots who get sick or cannot make a trip. It also charges that pilots not scheduled for duty have also snubbed "junior assignments," which are offered to lower seniority pilots at higher pay rates.

By allegedly making concerted efforts to refuse last-minute shifts, Spirit's lawsuit stated, the pilots were violating the Railway Labor Act, an anti-worker federal law used to effectively block strikes by airline and railway workers.

On Tuesday, a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order preventing the union from any "concerted refusal to perform normal pilot operations consistent with the status quo" until a further hearing. ALPA officials, who first denied any slowdown was taking place, quickly capitulated promising to comply with the order.

The airline's supposed concern for its passengers is entirely hollow. Spirit's executives were fully aware they had a pilot shortage before Monday night and did nothing to warn passengers. The airline, known as an Ultra-Low Cost Carrier (ULCC)--which regularly rates on the bottom for customer satisfaction--wants passengers to blame workers for conditions which are produced by relentless cost-cutting and the anarchy of the capitalist free market.

Rather than provide enough flights, seats or leg room for passengers, or hire enough employees and provide them with sufficient rest time, wages and benefits, airline executives are driven by what is called “capacity discipline” to squeeze as much profit as possible out of the existing numbers of workers and aging and over-extended airplanes and equipment. While the industry’s top executives and investors are richly rewarded for slashing costs and boosting their bottom lines, workers and passengers alike are driven beyond the breaking point.

Pilots at Spirit are among the lowest paid in the industry, with starting co-pilots earning $39,000 a year, about half what is paid at large carriers like American, Delta and United. An experienced Spirit pilot reportedly makes $189,000, 35-40 percent less than a comparable pilot at a larger carrier.

Pilots have been working under a seven-year-old contract, which included major pay and benefit concessions granted by ALPA. During the time in which contract negotiations have dragged out over the last two years the company has made $642 million in profits, while paying its key executives, including CEO Robert Fornaro, nearly $20 million during the same period.

The company also dragged out negotiations with its 2,200 flight attendants for over nine years. The workers rejected two contracts backed by the Association of Flight Attendants-Communications Workers of America in 2014, before ratifying a new five-year deal last year that included wage improvements.

After decades of cost-cutting, US-based carriers scored the highest profits in the global airline industry last year, raking in $20 billion out of a total of $35 billion in worldwide profits. Despite an anticipated rise in fuel prices and labor costs--after decades of stagnant and falling wages--the US carriers are expected to make $18 billion in profits in 2017 with a whopping 8.5 percent profit margin.

Airline workers are subjected to grueling schedules while fliers are packed into planes like sardines in a can, charged for check-in luggage, a meal or a snack, and forced to compete for a place to store their carry-on bags. Conditions for passengers resemble what lower-class steerage passengers on the bottom decks of the old ocean steamships faced while those who can afford first class get expedited service, comfortable seating and other amenities.

The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, pushed by the Democratic liberal icon Edward Kennedy, was supposed to increase competition, break up the monopoly carriers and create lower prices and better traveling conditions. This was followed by Reagan’s smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike in 1981--based on a plan drafted by the Federal Aviation Administration director under Democratic President Jimmy Carter--and decades of union-busting, wage and benefit cutting and mass layoffs.

Between 1978 and 1994, pay for airline workers fell precipitously, with flight attendants alone seeing a 40 percent decline during the period. Today labor costs are 21 percent lower in real dollars than in 1980.

Far from eliminating monopolies, the last four decades have seen the consolidation of the industry as some 200 carriers have merged, been taken over or gone out of business.

Over the last 12 years alone, the number of major US carriers has been reduced from 10 to four mega-carriers--American, Delta, United and Southwest—which control 80 percent of the market. A 2015 Justice Department case into potential collusion by the airlines to limit the number of seats for sale and keep fares high was quickly shut down by the Obama administration.

Wall Street has no intention of letting up on its demand that the airlines continue to slash costs.

In a public relations move, American Airlines announced last month that it would raise hourly pay for its 15,000 pilots--who make 8 percent less than Delta and United pilots--and its 26,000 flight attendants who are 4 percent behind their coworkers. This led investors to drive down American’s stock by nearly 9 percent in inter-day trading, prompting *Market Watch* to write that the dive in share value was “a stark reminder that what might be good for employees and customers can be upsetting for investors.”

The Trump administration has promised to provide the airlines with more deregulation and corporate tax cuts, which will produce even greater nightmares for passengers and workers alike.