

Disregard for passenger safety exposed in wake of fatal Southwest Airlines engine explosion

Alec Andersen
21 April 2018

As the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) continues its investigation into the fatal engine explosion that killed one woman and forced Southwest Airlines flight 1380 to make an emergency landing Tuesday, new reports have shed further light on the airline's disregard for passenger safety and opposition to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) safety regulations following an almost identical incident in 2016.

On Tuesday, Southwest Airlines flight 1380 from New York City to Dallas was flying at an altitude of over 31,000 feet with 144 passengers and five crew on board when a fan blade in the Boeing 737-700's left engine separated from the engine hub just 20 minutes after takeoff. The resultant explosion sent shrapnel flying into the passenger compartment of the fuselage, striking a female passenger and causing the cabin to depressurize, which then pulled the woman's upper body out of the airplane.

The pilot was forced to make an emergency landing in Philadelphia, where the passenger, Jennifer Riordan, was rushed to a nearby hospital and pronounced dead. Her cause of death has been identified as blunt force trauma to the head, neck, and torso. Seven others were treated for minor injuries.

At a press conference Tuesday evening, NTSB head Robert Sumwalt told reporters that investigators had discovered substantial evidence of metal fatigue in the area where the fan blade separated from the hub. A ring designed to contain engine components and prevent them from penetrating vulnerable parts of the plane in the event of failure was apparently ineffective. The separation was seemingly caused by cracks in the fan blade.

It has since emerged that CFM International, which manufactures the engines that power the Boeing 737-series, had issued a service bulletin and sought an FAA Airworthiness Directive to mandate safety inspections following an uncontained engine failure aboard a 2016 Southwest Airlines flight that bears a striking resemblance to Tuesday's fatal incident.

In September 2016, a fan in the left engine of a Southwest Airlines Boeing 737-700 separated from the hub during a flight from New Orleans to Orlando, sending shrapnel into the fuselage and leaving a five by 16-inch hole in the body of the aircraft. Fortunately, the passenger compartment remained intact and the pilot was able to make an emergency landing in Pensacola, Florida without any injuries.

A subsequent NTSB investigation found that a fan blade had separated from the engine hub due to metal fatigue that had produced a crack in the fan. The containment ring had likewise failed to protect the plane from shrapnel caused by the explosion.

In response to that incident, CFM International, a joint venture of GE Aviation and Safran Aircraft Engines, issued a service bulletin urging airlines to undertake ultrasonic imaging of their fleets to look for signs of fatigue. CFM also urged the Federal Aviation Administration to issue an Airworthiness Directive to ensure prompt compliance with the recommended inspections.

For over a year, the FAA has been considering an Airworthiness Directive to require ultrasonic imaging of all CFM engines of that kind within a 12-month time period. The Air Line Pilots Association, which represents 60,000 commercial pilots in the US and Canada, supported the measure. Despite the support

from the pilots' association for inspections, Southwest and some other airlines pushed back hard against the requirement.

Though the comment period ended in October 2017, no decision has yet been made. The European Union is reportedly considering a similar proposal.

In its comment on the proposal, Southwest argued that 12 months was not enough time for the company to inspect the 732 engines in its fleet that are subject to the directive. The airline also complained that the recommendation did not account for the fans that were already inspected and the findings rate, advocating a more "data-informed AD compliance time." In other words, Southwest suggested that since few issues were detected during their previous inspections, there is no need for the inspections to be done within 12 months.

Southwest wrote in a statement that although it opposed the airworthiness directive proposed by CFM, it had nonetheless completed the inspections recommended by the manufacturer last year. However, the airline has declined to say whether the engine that exploded on Tuesday had been inspected. Southwest pledged Tuesday to inspect the remainder of its fleet within 30 days.

A spokesman for CFM told Gizmodo that the engine involved in Tuesday's incident was not subject to the Service Bulletins issued following the 2016 incident, and that Southwest had implemented the recommended inspections. If true, this would indicate that the problem is much more widespread than the manufacturer had previously stated.

It has also been revealed that Southwest Airlines mechanics have raised numerous safety concerns, which have been dismissed by the airline as a bargaining tactic during ongoing contract negotiations.

In a February 26 email to Southwest Airlines Chief Operating Officer Mike van de Ven obtained by the *Chicago Business Journal*, Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association director Bret Oestreich warned: "The truth is that there exists a concern regarding the degradation of safety within Southwest's maintenance program as determined by the Federal Aviation Administration." He went on to denounce management's "ostrich-like head-in-the-sand approach to the problems that exist within our maintenance program and culture."

Southwest Airlines, which took in \$21.2 billion in

revenue last year, operates on a low-cost model that offers cheap tickets for passengers willing to forego standard amenities offered by other airlines. In keeping with its overall business model, Southwest reportedly contracts out most of its maintenance to third-party companies, which often employ low-paid workers in impoverished countries where safety regulations are less stringent.

In the wake of Tuesday's tragedy, the FAA announced that it will require inspections of all CFM56-7B engines that have flown a certain number of miles. This measure, which comes after the agency dragged its feet on the aforementioned Airworthiness Directive for months, is little more than a cosmetic measure designed to cover for the greed and negligence of the airlines.

The only solution to prevent future such incidents is to bring the airlines and all other transportation infrastructure under the democratic control of the working class, to be run as public services.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact