

Southwest Airlines sues airline mechanics over alleged slowdown

Tom Hall
4 March 2019

Southwest Airlines announced a lawsuit last Thursday against its airline mechanics' union over what management claimed was an illegal work slowdown last month which grounded dozens of aircraft. The 2,700 Southwest Airline mechanics legally represented by the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) have been working without a new contract for over six years.

Last month, the low-cost carrier declared an "operational emergency" after being forced to ground as many as 62 planes in a single day, almost 10 percent of its fleet and almost double what the airline says it can absorb without while operating a normal schedule. The groundings led to hundreds of delayed or canceled flights nationwide. Southwest immediately blamed the outages on an "unlawful, concerted action" by mechanics, and sent a letter to the AMFA demanding that it restrain its members.

The alleged "work slowdown" was in fact a significant *increase* in the number of mechanical and safety issues reported by mechanics during maintenance, causing a larger than usual number of planes to be grounded. Southwest claims, without offering evidence, that most of these issues were trivial or cosmetic, such as missing seat numbers in the main cabin.

The airline later claimed to have identified 100 mechanics in several locations who were responsible for the alleged slowdown. The mechanics could be subject to termination or even legal action because of reactionary, pro-corporate laws which prohibit strikes in the airline industry in most circumstances.

Outside of the self-serving assertions of the airline, there is no definitive evidence as of this writing that a job action actually occurred, and official statements from the AMFA neither confirm nor deny whether it

took place. However, if the mechanics actually did take matters into their own hands, as seems likely, they demonstrated considerable courage in fighting back against a brutal and dangerous work regime. Workers should rally to the defense of the mechanics and oppose Southwest's attempts to victimize them for doing their jobs.

Southwest mechanics are by some measures the most overworked in the entire US airline industry. The airline employs a mere 3.3 mechanics per plane, compared to 11 or 12 for other major carriers such as Delta and American. Industry-wide, mechanics have reported that management routinely demands that they overlook issues during inspections. Some have reported being disciplined or even fired for exceeding the scope of their assigned jobs by addressing mechanical issues discovered while working maintenance on other parts of the aircraft.

According to the AFMA, management also routinely fails to provide an adequate supply of spare parts, forcing mechanics to cannibalize parts from other planes in order to keep them flying.

Last month, CBS News aired an investigative report including interviews with dozens of airline mechanics, who described what they called a "short-cut environment." One mechanic told the TV network, "If you're working, say, on a landing gear, lubing it, and you notice that a flap three feet away is leaking, and you write up the flap leak, you're beyond your scope ... I've seen people walked off the job, held on suspension for a month or more because they've reported problems that they supposedly were outside their scope for finding."

Many of the mechanics spoke to CBS News anonymously out of fear of retaliation. This broadly aligns with fears of injured Delta flight attendants who

recently spoke anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site*, indicating that fear of management retaliation is widespread across the entire industry.

This state of affairs produced the fatal tragedy on Southwest Flight 1380 last April, when a fan blade from one of the plane's engines broke loose, sending shrapnel into the side of the aircraft. One passenger, Jennifer Riordan, died after being partially sucked through the side of the aircraft at 31,000 feet. The accident, the first fatal in-flight accident in Southwest's history, was preceded by an almost identical incident in 2016. Southwest opposed a proposal by the Federal Aviation Administration to mandate safety inspections of its engines, arguing that a 12-month time limit was insufficient time for it to inspect its entire fleet.

As if to drive home the mechanic's safety concerns, the same week as last month's "operational emergency" a Southwest flight was forced to make an emergency landing in Orlando due to a blown tire on its landing gear.

Southwest mechanics, once among the highest-paid in the industry, have seen their wage levels relative to the rest of the industry decline because they been working under their old wage rates more than 6 years after their old contract became "amendable." The contract, which remains in force, has not actually "expired," because the federal Railway Labor Act prohibits labor contracts in the railroad and airline industries from having fixed expiration dates, in order to prevent strikes.

Last fall, the vast majority of the mechanics voted down a new contract which would have raised pay by a meager 14.8 percent, barely enough to keep up with inflation over the previous 6 years.

Southwest also offshores more than half of its maintenance work overseas, among the highest rates in the industry. In addition to exploiting lower-paid overseas workers and providing them with leverage against their US based workforce, the use of offshore maintenance allows Southwest and other major carriers to avoid what minimal regulatory enforcement exists in the US.

The alleged slowdown comes at a critical time for Southwest, by far the largest low-cost carrier in the United States. The airline finally received approval last month from the FAA to begin flights to Hawaii, where it also intends to challenge the locally-established

Hawaiian Airlines for control of the lucrative inter-island market.

Rumors have also swirled since the end of February of a potential takeover of the company by billionaire investor Warren Buffett, whose Berkshire Hathaway owns billions in Southwest stock. Rumors that Buffett would purchase stock for \$75 per share, well over its \$54 market price, caused a jump in Southwest's stock prices. However, the price declined almost as quickly a few days later when Southwest announced the lawsuit against the mechanics union, no doubt due to fears of broadening labor unrest.

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