

Amazon Air cargo flight crashes after vicious cost-cutting

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It will take more than a year to determine the cause of a recent Amazon Air crash, according to Robert Sumwalt, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). “This seems to be very much a mystery, but the NTSB has 52 years of experience solving such mysteries, and I’m confident we will get to the bottom of this,” Sumwalt told *Flying* magazine.

Amazon Air was established several years ago as a way for Amazon, the Internet retail giant, to increase profits by cutting its growing shipping costs. In 2015, Amazon began leasing aircraft from companies that also provided employees to fly, maintain and insure them. Amazon owns no planes, and the pilots who deliver its cargo are not legally its employees. In the process of establishing Amazon Air, Amazon has shown its usual disregard for worker training and safety, maintaining its laser focus on the bottom line. The crash is the company’s first.

The accident occurred on February 23. Atlas Air-operated Flight 3591 from Miami to Houston crashed outside of Houston, killing all three people on board. Captain Ricky Blakely and First Officer Conrad Jules Aska were delivering cargo for Amazon and for the US Postal Service. Mesa Airlines Captain Sean Archuleta was riding in the jump seat as a commuter.

After the plane encountered turbulence, its engines increased to maximum thrust and its nose turned upward. Alarmed, the crew pushed the nose down at a 49-degree angle, which caused an exceptionally steep descent. The plane accelerated and dropped from 6,525 feet to 3,025 feet in 30 seconds.

This prompted the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to issue an alert notice. To steady the aircraft, the pilots pulled it up to a 20-degree angle. Although they did not issue a distress call, they began communications consistent with loss of control of the

plane, according to the NTSB’s preliminary review. The plane went down approximately 30 miles southeast of Houston’s George Bush International Airport.

Speaking to the press, pilots have said that the crew’s maneuvers during the flight were unusual, and even counterintuitive. “Obviously, going 49 degrees nose down is beyond a radical move. That’s not something an airplane should be doing, especially at that altitude,” said Todd Curtis, a former safety engineer for Boeing, in an interview with the Associated Press.

The accident is not the first for Atlas Air, which has had several irregularities over the past year. A cargo plane operated by an Atlas Air subsidiary swerved off the runway at the Northern Kentucky Airport in October 2018. Another Atlas Air plane had a hard landing in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in July 2018. The flight inspection subsequently found significant damage to the jet.

Mere weeks before the deadly crash, pilots for Atlas Air and Air Transport Services Group (ATSG), which also contracts with Amazon Air, told *Business Insider* that an accident was inevitable. They said these companies paid so little, they were unable to attract experienced pilots, even though Amazon is requesting more and more flights. The pilots also said the training their companies provided was inadequate. Many pilots were overworked, fatigue was common and employee morale was low.

Atlas Air and ATSG were grinding down their collective workforce before Amazon Air was founded, but the rapid expansion of the latter made the existing problems worse. The exponential growth of Amazon Air has forced pilots who are responsible for training new-hires and educating them about safety to work at reckless speeds.

Business at Atlas Air and ATSG is booming as a

result of Amazon, and safety standards are slipping. Veteran pilots are appalled at the companies' hiring decisions. "We have guys in the [first officer seats] who have no business flying airplanes, and certainly no business flying heavy jets," a pilot who has flown with ATSG for 23 years told *Business Insider*.

The quality of training has been deteriorating, according to pilots. The FAA has at least twice warned ABX Air, which is owned by ATSG, about creating "a disruptive and confrontational atmosphere" during pilot training. In a letter to ABX, the FAA alleged that David Soaper, the company's president, recently interrupted a training session to shout at crew members. Unsurprisingly, one of the workers abruptly walked out of the session.

Pilots for Amazon Air have reported that they do not have regular work schedules. Instead, they are often asked to work mere hours before their flights are due to depart. Pilots have been called in on their days off and forced to work overtime. One pilot for ABX reported that he was away from home for two months at a time in recent years. The schedules are so punishing that some pilots are worried about their peers' mental health.

Pilots who fly for Amazon Air have been involved in contract disputes with their employers for almost five years. They have not received a raise in almost 10 years, and their benefits have declined.

The last contract for ABX and Atlas was finalized during the financial crisis that began in 2008 and includes many painful concessions. The workers endured a pay cut, lost vacation days, and the freezing of pension contributions and matched contributions to health care plans. On average, Amazon Air pilots with the most experience make approximately 33 percent less than pilots at UPS and FedEx who have the same experience and are flying the same aircraft. Yet the pay of the top four executives at ATSG increased by more than 100 percent from 2015 to 2017.

The Airline Professionals Association, a division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, represents the pilots. For decades, the Teamsters union has collaborated with management at various companies to extract more labor and profit from its members. In October 2018, the union forced a contract with United Parcel Service on members who had rejected it by a vote of more than 62 percent. Union officials,

meanwhile, have maintained their political influence and salaries that keep them in the top 5 or 10 percent of earners.



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