

US flight attendants speak out over uniforms that cause illness

Brian Brown and Tom Hall

12 June 2019

Body rashes. Burning throat and eyes. Coughing and headaches. These are just some of the medical symptoms American Airlines flight attendants have been dealing with since the rollout of new uniforms for more than 70,000 airline employees in September 2016.

Many Delta Air Lines workers are reporting similar health issues with their work uniforms, which were produced by a different manufacturer.

“They rolled out three years ago, and when I opened the box, this awful fishy, chemical smell hit me,” one American Airlines flight attendant told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“I washed everything several times. My house stunk. I tried to wear it, and it gave me rashes, headaches, chest tightening, dry cough,” she continued. “I figured out it was the uniform. I quit wearing it and was better, but if I was around others wearing the uniform, I got the symptoms. I would get rashes on my chest, neck and arms. I wore the skirt that was lined. My arms would get a rash because they would brush against the skirt. It’s been going on three years.”

After discussing her symptoms with co-workers, she realized that her physical ailments were widespread and that their uniforms were likely the cause. “We just sort of figured it out. That was the only common denominator, and you felt better when you took it off within an hour,” she said. Over 5,000 American Airlines employees have filed complaints that their uniforms have made them ill.

The company is preparing to replace the uniforms with those provided by a different supplier. However, this change will not be completed until 2022. In the meantime, American Airlines is allowing workers who experienced illness to choose alternative clothing until the new line of uniforms is completed sometime in 2022. However, uniforms from the new manufacturer, Lands’ End, have been the source of almost identical complaints from flight attendants at Delta.

American Airlines and the company that supplied the uniforms—Twin Hill, a subsidiary of the company Tailored Brands, which also owns clothing outlets Men’s Wearhouse and Jos. A. Bank—have stated, “The uniforms are safe and designed with the appropriate levels of chemicals used to sustain the quality of the work uniforms.” American Airlines insists that its uniforms are safe to wear and have spent millions on tests to prove that the uniforms are safe.

Twin Hill has been dealing with lawsuits from other airline industry workers making similar complaints about the safety of their uniforms. Around 10 percent of employees at Alaska Airlines reported adverse reactions when it rolled out Twin Hill uniforms in 2011. Alaska Airlines later dropped Twin Hill as its uniform vendor, but not before flight attendants filed a lawsuit against Twin Hill in 2013. A similar suit by American Airlines flight attendants filed last year is still pending.

Independent studies have found high levels of carcinogenic material in the uniforms’ fabric. However, the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) union conducted its own research on the uniforms and found that one piece of the uniform, a collar, was found to have levels of cadmium higher than the acceptable textile industry standard. The APFA’s test also determined the uniforms contain formaldehyde, nickel, and tetrachlorophenol, a corrosive chemical known to cause eye irritation.

A Harvard study from 2017 also found a high correlation between the introduction of Twin Hill uniforms at Alaska Airlines and self-reported symptoms such as rashes and irritated skin, shortness of breath and blurred vision.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a unit of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, issued a health hazard evaluation of symptomatic reactions believed to be tied to uniforms

supplied to the tens of thousands of American Airlines employees.

“We are the new Radium Girls,” Heather Poole, a flight attendant and published author who has detailed working conditions facing flight attendants, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. This refers to female factory workers in the early 20th century poisoned by the radioactive material in the self-luminous paint they used to paint watch dials. The companies lied to their workforce, claiming the paint was harmless, even as their employees suffered from anemia, necrosis of the jaw and other symptoms of radiation poisoning.

“It took them years to get sick, so the company would deny responsibility. But they had tumors on their faces and other horrific injuries. Their bones would disintegrate from the inside out and their jaws would fall off. And the company was able to legally deny it when it was so obvious. It was mostly women workers, who considered it a highly desirable job. It’s the same with us.

“You have to understand that these uniforms are not resale clothing. At Lands’ End, the shirt you wear is not the same as my uniform. That’s part of our problem because the airline, in public statements, compares our uniforms to retail items by the same companies. But they put chemicals like formaldehyde in our uniforms, and a lot of other things we don’t know about, to make it durable.”

Heather took medical leave in August 2018 after she began experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, elevated heart rate and fatigue. “Then I started having anxiety. I almost dreaded going to the airport. Why was I having these feelings? And this young flight attendant said that the heart monitor on her watch saw heart-rate spikes.”

She says that, to her knowledge, not a single worker has successfully obtained workers’ compensation benefits due to adverse reactions to their uniforms. American Airlines uses the infamous claims administration company Sedgwick to handle its workers’ comp cases. The *World Socialist Web Site* has interviewed Delta flight attendants and Amazon workers who have suffered serious workplace injuries only to be systematically denied care by Sedgwick and even harassed by Sedgwick’s private detectives.

“Sedgwick spins it by claiming that it is just allergies, meaning they don’t have to cover it,” Heather said. “How do you find a doctor? When you do, how does he know what the chemicals are when the company keeps insisting it is safe?”

“The union is doing nothing,” she added. “They are just counting numbers. Twin Hill got to them, I think, because they are not helpful at all anymore.”

The widespread health problems reported by airline workers come in the context of a regime of brutal cost-cutting and exploitation by management at major air carriers, the result of years of consolidation and layoffs in the industry. Delta Air Lines recently was exposed attempting to lock a flight crew into their aircraft as it sat at the gate. The crew was approaching the company’s maximum duty hours, the most they can be required to work without a break.

Fearing a delay or cancellation if the crew insisted on taking their break, and without a backup crew available, Delta management instructed the gate agent to keep the door to the jet bridge closed.

“A lot of flight attendants are afraid to speak,” Heather said. “They will just fire you. It’s like an abusive relationship. Because of seniority, you don’t just start over where you left off, you start off at the bottom at less than \$20,000 per year. If you speak out, they’ll find a reason to fire you. There are so many loopholes that it’s easy to fire.”

“At first, I felt so hopeless. I felt like, ‘they’re just going to get away with it.’ But I decided to publicize it. Every day I write about it and tweet about it. My co-workers hear me and are going to learn about it. Before social media, they could bury this kind of stuff. Now, they can’t make it disappear.”

“It’s criminal what they’re doing and they think they can get away with it, and they have for so long. But then it gets to be too big. And then they get caught. They’ve gotten so cocky they can’t cover it up anymore.”

Are you an airline worker, flight attendant or a pilot facing poor working conditions or health issues? Contact us to tell your story.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact