

11,000 food service workers vote to strike US airlines

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More than 11,000 catering workers at airlines in 20 airports across the United States have voted to authorize a strike by overwhelming majorities. The action is part of the growing militancy of airline workers, including the ongoing strike by EVA Air flight attendants in Taiwan, job actions by catering workers at Lufthansa and a threatened strike later this month by cabin crew against Germany's flagship carrier.

Catering workers prepare food for the two largest airline catering subcontractors in the world, LSG Sky Chefs and Gate Gourmet, which then deliver it to flights on Delta, United, and American Airlines. At some airports, workers are employed directly by United Airlines. Lufthansa is planning to spin off its Sky Chefs unit.

Most of the catering workers in the US are members of UNITE-HERE, though some belong to the Teamsters and Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). There are a total of 25,000 airline catering workers covered by union contracts.

As part of the highly-exploited food service industry, catering workers are some of the lowest paid airport employees, making as little as \$8.46 an hour. This leaves workers in poverty, especially families living in large urban areas with soaring housing prices. About one-third do not have health insurance for themselves or their families due to high costs of employer plans.

Workers have also cited a number of health and safety issues in the industrial warehouse kitchens due to understaffing, insufficient equipment, and low-quality maintenance. The Food and Drug Administration has cited Sky Chefs and Gate Gourmet for numerous food-safety violations in the past several years, such as live cockroaches and harmful bacteria at facilities in Denver and Cincinnati.

According to the UNITE-HERE website, workers have authorized a strike at major airports in Minneapolis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cincinnati, Boston, New

York, Washington DC, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta, Orlando, and Miami. While the authorization votes reflect workers' readiness to launch a struggle, the union will only allow a strike to take place "when released by the National Mediation Board."

Negotiations or federal mediation sessions are currently ongoing in Phoenix, North Carolina, Denver, Houston, New Jersey. After announcing the strike authorization votes and organizing harmless one-day pickets, union officials have been virtually silent about the status of negotiations. They have told workers to wait for sanction for a strike from Trump's federal board.

For catering workers to go forward they will need to form rank-and-file strike committees that will fight for what workers' need, not what the corporations, the Trump administration and the unions say is affordable. They must also make a critical assessment of the forces they are up against and outline a strategy to defend their independent interests.

First, the catering and airline companies occupy a critical position within a globally integrated industry. Sky Chefs delivers millions of meals at 205 airports in 53 countries, and Gate Gourmet touts that it distributes food to over 200 locations in over 60 countries and territories. These food subcontractors work with United, Delta, and American Airlines, which dominate nearly 45 percent of the US airline market, according to the Department of Transportation.

The global integration of the airline industry means that workers cannot carry out a successful struggle on a national, let alone local scale. The unions are based on the national framework and have long accepted whatever the companies say they need to stay globally competitive, ie., profitable. US workers must unite with their counterparts in Germany and throughout the world to fight the assault by the global airlines and the financial powers and

capitalist governments that stand behind them.

Second, workers cannot count on the unions to wage a real struggle. UNITE-HERE, Teamsters, and the RWDSU have no intention of calling a nationwide strike that could cripple the airline industry and inspire other food service workers, flight attendants, pilots, mechanics and other airport workers to join the strike. The lucrative salaries and perks of the union bureaucracy depends on demonstrating their usefulness in supplying the corporations with cheap labor.

Since breaking off from the AFL-CIO and joining the Change to Win Federation in 2005, UNITE-HERE has portrayed itself as a supposedly militant and even left-wing union, which has focused on food industry and hospitality workers that many other unions considered too poor to organize. UNITE-HERE executives often use radical phraseology, deploying identity politics to make a false appeal to minority and immigrant workers who make up the majority of the service industry workforce.

In practice, however, the union has betrayed every struggle by these workers, ensuring that the employers can continue to pay poverty-level wages. In the past two years, UNITE-HERE betrayed strikes by casino workers in Las Vegas and hotel workers in Chicago and a number of cities across the United States.

The terrible wages of catering workers at the Seattle-Tacoma (Sea-Tac) Airport are the product of a cynical deal by the union bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and the various pseudo-left organizations, including Socialist Alternative, that are associated with the “Fight for 15” campaign.

Seattle city councilwoman Kshama Sawant, a leading member of Socialist Alternative, and an assortment of unions campaigned for the \$15 minimum wage legislation for the Sea-Tac municipality. The legislation specifically exempted companies’ union contracts from the minimum wage law, cynically claiming that pay had to be part of the collective bargaining process. Similar exemptions exist in minimum wage legislation in major cities along the West Coast, including Los Angeles .

At the time, executives from Seattle-area unions like Service Employees International Union and UNITE-HERE told workers these exemptions were necessary to fight for non-wage improvements such as healthcare coverage and workplace protections. None of this has materialized.

As a result, the catering workers under UNITE-HERE are the lowest paid in the airport, making as low as \$10 an hour when most other workers are making above \$15. In

other words, catering workers fighting against poverty wages are in a direct struggle against the unions, the Democratic Party and their pseudo-left apologists like Sawant.

Sawant continues to call the bill an “absolute historic victory,” as she did in 2014. But even right-wing business think tanks noted that the measures would only benefit the corporations and the union apparatus, not the workers. “Advocates estimate that Prop. 1 would cover about 6,300 workers,” Freedom Foundation writer Max Nelson wrote in 2015, “If the initiative produces 1,000 new union members paying an average of \$900 in dues per year, unions will generate an additional annual income of about \$900,000, for a one-time investment of about \$825,000. Not bad at all.”

As we exposed in October, the executives atop UNITE-HERE make six-figure salaries and control assets worth over \$150 million, including marketable securities and other investments of \$77.2 million.

Airline catering workers must break out of the isolation and suppression imposed by UNITE-HERE and the other unions, instead pursuing a strategy that unites all airline and food service workers in a common fight to win their demands.

Rank-and-file workplace and strike committees must be established in every airport to carry out the necessary tasks—establishing an uncompromising list of demands, communicating with airline workers across the country through independent social media channels, appealing to union and non-union workers throughout the global airline industry, and preparing for a nationally and internationally coordinated strike.



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