

American Airlines contract talks with unions at a standstill

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31 January 2020

Several hundred American Airlines pilots picketed the company's major hub at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport in Texas on Wednesday to demand improvements in scheduling, pay and benefits. They were joined by American flight attendants and maintenance workers, along with pilots from United Airlines and Delta.

Fifteen thousand American Airlines pilots, members of the Allied Pilots Association (APA), are seeking a new contract, along with workers in three other unions. The airline offered pilots a choice last August between a derisory three percent annual raise or a 2.5 percent raise with a \$2,000 signing bonus—barely more than the current rate of inflation.

In the US airline industry, collective bargaining agreements are governed by the Railway Labor Act (RLA), which prohibits labor contracts from expiring in key transportation industries. This corporatist law, aimed at severely limiting strikes, was passed in 1926 after decades of massive struggles in the railroad industry, including the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894, led by future socialist leader Eugene Debs.

Workers are forced to stay on the job once their contracts become “amendable,” or up for renegotiation, while the contracts make their way through endless arbitration and mediation mechanisms. Raises only kick in after an agreement is reached.

Contract negotiations with American's 26,000 flight attendants in the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) have also been ongoing since last year. A major concern for flight attendants are the adverse health effects, including skin rashes, nausea and heart problems, from their uniforms, which contain toxic anti-wrinkle chemicals. American flight attendants filed a lawsuit against uniform maker Twin

Hill in 2017. After years of downplaying the link between health problems and the uniforms, American will finally roll out replacement uniforms in March.

The problem is industry-wide. Delta workers filed their own class action suit in December 2019. Similar health problems have been reported at Alaska and Southwest Airlines.

The 30,000 American workers who belong to the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) unions are still seeking a contract with the airline. Their contract became amendable in 2015, and the two sides have had multiple rounds of unsuccessful negotiations since then. The TWU-IAM is the largest union at American.

The negotiations between TWU-IAM and American were transferred to the National Mediation Board (NMB) late in 2018. The major issues involved for the TWU-IAM workers is the transferring of work on aircraft outside of their facilities to exploit cheaper labor, and health care costs. The latter is an added hurdle because both unions have separate plans with the company.

In August 2019 American won a court injunction against the TWU-IAM over an alleged work slowdown by the airline's mechanics which forced the cancellation of 900 flights in two months over the summer. The TWU-IAM declared that it would fully comply with the terms of the injunction, which requires that the union direct its members to not refuse overtime, and to work at a pace that the company deems acceptable, or face fines and discipline.

The TWU-IAM cave-in to the federal court ruling is in line with their lengthy record in forcing through concessions against workers. In New York City, TWU Local 100 blocked a strike of transit workers by signing

a sellout agreement in December which contains historic cuts, with the savings to be shared jointly between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the union bureaucracy. The role of the IAM in the airline manufacturing industry is so notorious—in 2013, it sparked a rebellion at a Boeing plant north of Seattle when it proposed a deal ending the right to strike and company health care—that a unionization effort at a Boeing plant in South Carolina ended in a humiliating rejection in 2017.

American's fleet of aircraft includes 24 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft, which have been grounded at airlines worldwide after massive design flaws led to the crash of two aircraft and the deaths of 346 people. The union claims that the cause of many of the cancellations was the airline's overuse of their remaining fleet to compensate for the grounded aircraft.

Delta Air Lines is the only one of the four major US airlines (which, in addition to American, also include Southwest and United) without any Boeing 737 MAX planes in its fleet, giving it an advantage over its rivals.

Since the September 11 terror attacks, and especially after the 2008 financial crisis, the US airline industry has seen a wave of consolidations and mergers, reducing the number of major airlines from seven to four and shedding hundreds of thousands of jobs. Further cost-cutting was achieved through a series of bankruptcies—beginning with US Airways in 2002 and 2004, Delta and Northwest in 2005 and American in 2011. American's merger with US Airways in 2013 created one of the largest airlines in the world.



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