

“We are expendable”: Delta flight attendant speaks on corporate recklessness at US airlines

Tim Rivers
10 April 2020

Hundreds of airline flight attendants have become infected with the COVID-19 virus. More than 100 American Airlines flight attendants have tested positive, according to a report in the *Dallas Morning News* Tuesday. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants union has informed its members that this is likely to increase.

American Airlines has confirmed that one flight attendant in Philadelphia, Paul Frishkorn, died from COVID-19 on March 23, and a pilot and baggage handler at the Dallas-Ft. Worth Airport, where the airline is headquartered, had also tested positive. Three TSA agents at DFW have also tested positive, the government agency has reported.

Responsibility for this state of affairs lies with the airlines themselves, who have not provided flight attendants with basic personal protective equipment (PPE), and have even prevented flight attendants from using masks and gloves they provide themselves. While they have not ruled out mass layoffs later this year, the airline industry has taken \$58 billion in federal bailout funds through the CARES Act, provided to them *carte blanche* with no restrictions on wage and benefits cuts or price gouging. An industry lobby group effectively threatened to hold the jobs of 750,000 workers for ransom, threatening mass layoffs unless funds were disbursed “immediately.”

But even with federal bailout money, the airlines will only postpone layoffs through September. United Airlines is already telling its workers to brace for layoffs as soon as the bailout restrictions end on September 30.

The airlines have been covering up the danger for months. Dallas-based Southwest Airlines has also not

disclosed any specific positive COVID-19 cases at the carrier, although several flight attendants say they are aware of positive tests, have been diagnosed themselves or are in quarantine because of exposure to another flight attendant with COVID-19. The airline said in a statement provided by spokesperson, Brian Parris, that “only” less than one percent of the airline’s 60,000 employees, that is, as many as 600 employees, have contracted the virus.

American Airlines has not disclosed the total confirmed COVID-19 cases in the company. It claims that it has contacted employees that have been exposed to confirmed cases and has asked them to go into quarantine for two weeks. Only this past weekend did the company announce that it had secured face masks for crew members.

On the contrary, airline employees who have spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* assert that nothing has been done. “We need not to be flying right now,” a Delta flight attendant said. “We have gate agents who are saying, ‘This is ridiculous to have us still working. We see hundreds of people, and we don’t know who has it.’”

“The pilots are saying, ‘We are just expendable.’ If I get the virus and it kills me, they will write up a little notice in their company newsletter, and that’s the end of it.”

“We are working in a cesspool of infection, and the airlines will not shut down. They have cut the fares so people are still flying for whatever. We wouldn’t mind working if it would help save people’s lives, but we are risking our lives to fly people for nonessential travel. It makes no sense.

“It was just a week and a half ago that they started

letting us wear masks and only two weeks before that they started letting us wear gloves. They were real slow about giving us any kind of protection.

“They have known about this for months, but they are not trying to protect anybody. They say they will let you know if you worked with a person who has contracted coronavirus, but nobody’s saying anything. It’s like I am just a pawn in a big scheme. If you die off, they just move you to the side and get somebody else to keep the machine pumping out money.”

On the Trump administration’s drive to send people back to work, she said, “When I hear Trump, it’s like watching the actions of a mad man running the country. It is just plain scary. He first said this was a hoax when he knew about it back in December. All he cares about is his money. The stock market is where his concern is at.

“His drive to get people back to work is just going to get more people sick and more death. It is sad that more people have to die. All he wants to do is help feed the machine. It makes no sense.

“They bail out the big corporations ... throw them a steak, and they’re giving us a bone. It’s like, ‘Let them eat cake!’ It’s an insult. We are getting stale, moldy cake. We don’t get enough to pay our bills for a month.

“Sanders is talking good. But he is still a Democrat, a politician. He is not for the people. He has got that two-faced mask on too.

“In our industry, we have the Department of Transportation that says the pilots are not allowed to [walk out] under the Railroad Act. As much as we want to stop and not do this madness, they have us in a hard spot because we have bills to pay.

“All the politicians, in their town hall meetings, say they want to hear our concerns. But they are not stopping people from working so they can be safe. They would rather see people die than have a work stoppage.

“It is madness. They are throwing money to the big corporations instead of giving it to the poor people that need it to survive during this time. That’s the madness. The government is a business that doesn’t care about the people.

“The way they see it, if enough old people die, that is less they have to pay out in Social Security. This is the perfect way to wipe out the vulnerable people. Yesterday they announced it has now killed more

people than the September 11 attacks.”

Delta flight attendants, alone among the major carriers, are not unionized. The Association of Flight Attendants union has attempted to gain access to the company for years without success. Although the company has campaigned vigorously against union certification, the major factor behind the failed unionization efforts is the track record of the unions themselves, which have carried out concessions for decades.

The position of AFA President Sara Nelson has been virtually indistinguishable from that of the industry’s lobbyists. Appearing on MSNBC with Democratic Congresswoman Katie Porter of California Tuesday morning, Nelson declared her support for the bailout, declaring that it was needed to “keep [workers’] paychecks going.”

“This is about life and death,” Nelson continued. “So as the airlines are going out of business, like Compass Air Lines yesterday, there are more people going to the unemployment lines. If we don’t direct this money and get this to people’s paychecks and keep them in their jobs,” she concluded, “we’re going to have more people on those unemployment lines and increasing the death rate, frankly, because we’ve got more interaction between the public.”

“The union is just a company,” the Delta flight attendant said. “They announced that 100 American Airlines flight attendants have been diagnosed with COVID-19. The union is a joke. They are not supporting us in any way. They know exactly what we are up against. They are not doing anything for us.

“They have money in their pocket. They work for the companies. When they announce that 100 flight attendants have been infected, you know it has got to be more than that. They only said that because the situation is starting to boil over, and they have to say something.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact