

“It’s back to the way it was before I made things public,” says whistleblower

As flights increase, airline workers face more COVID-19 dangers

Steve Filips
2 July 2020

At least 10 Delta Air Lines workers have died and 500 have become infected with COVID-19, according to an investor conference call last month. Despite the spread of the deadly disease among airline workers, the company, which has more than 90,000 employees worldwide, announced it would be increasing its domestic and international flights this month.

Even as the pandemic continues to surge, airlines continue to push for increased flights. American Airlines has resumed booking its flights to capacity on July 1. United Airlines, which never blocked out seats or limited capacity, will be adding 25,000 flights in August.

According to new data from the Transport Security Administration (TSA), the number of airline travelers reached 600,000 on June 29, exceeding 25 percent of pre-pandemic numbers for the first time since March 19. Although airlines revenue was down by 90 percent in the second quarter, the stocks of the major airlines rose sharply Tuesday on the news. The airlines have also benefited from a \$25 billion corporate bailout under the bipartisan CARES Act, which includes the direct purchase of corporate debt.

At the same time, airline management is seeking to do everything to cover up the spread of infections and suppress opposition from workers. In April, Delta sent 25,000 flight attendants an e-mail directing those that tested positive for COVID-19 to “refrain from notifying” co-workers about their condition or posting reports on social media.

Whistleblowers were also fired. In April, on the largest US regional carriers, Envoy Airlines, formerly

American Eagle, fired Kelly Kolberg, a ramp worker who exposed unsafe conditions at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW). Envoy is a low-cost subsidiary of American Airlines with 18,000 employees. Starting wages for ramp and baggage workers was \$11.99 at Envoy compared to \$15.23 at American.

The unsafe conditions led to the death of workers at DFW airport, including 37-year-old Glenmar Gabriel, a 15-year veteran ramp worker who died on April 5. Dozens of other workers also became infected at American Airlines’ largest hub. The Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area has now become a hotspot for the deadly disease with nearly 7,000 cases reported June 30, up from 638 on June 8.

On his Facebook page in April, Kelly Kolberg explained, “I was FIRED for blowing the whistle on my company Envoy Air for the filthy dangerous conditions in which we were being forced to work in. Me and about 80 plus others run bags each shift between American Eagle and American Airlines connecting flights. We each pick up 20 bags without gloves then deliver to wherever and then end up back in our break room touching whatever.”

Kolberg recently told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Apparently everything is back to the way things were before I made things public.”

Back in March, Kolberg first reported the unsafe conditions to Envoy, the Transport Workers Union (TWU), and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). “I was disgusted with the filthy conditions, the lack of PPE, the empty hand

sanitizer, empty soap, and empty paper towels,” he wrote at the time.

At first, management and the union feigned concern. “In that same break room, three weeks ago our VP at Envoy came in to address concerns regarding the 40 people in a break room and six people at a picnic table. He tells us it’s okay that we have this many people in a room because we are essential workers,” Kelly explained on his Facebook page.

“Fast forward two-and-a-half weeks and I hear of numerous infections at Envoy, all through word of mouth, not from Envoy or any official outlet. Turns out, the majority of cases were from the break room where I tried to shed light on unacceptable conditions. The following day I heard a work friend, Glenmar Gabriel, had passed away. He was COVID-19 positive in addition to two of his four men crew working gate B39.”

“There have been positive cases for two weeks,” Kelly continued, “yet the company hasn’t even informed a single employee officially of the cases. Everything is by word of mouth and Facebook pages.”

Glenmar, Kelly explained on his Facebook page, “was a really great guy” and “one of the hardest workers I’ve seen.” Kelly said his co-worker left a lifelong impact on him and others. “G trained me two-and-a-half years ago, and I’ll never forget every single time I’d walk by him with his big beautiful smile he’d go in his Filipino accent, ‘Hey Kelly, what’s up?’ I’ll never forget him.” He added, “Now there’s a family who has lost a massive part of their family, and most importantly there is a little girl who doesn’t have a daddy.”

To add insult to injury, in late May, American Airlines announced the layoff of 5,000 workers, mostly at its Dallas-Ft. Worth hub. Over the previous two months, the company forced nearly 4,500 workers—many of them the pilots and flight attendants—to take early retirements. The cuts came just a few months after the company opened up its new \$300 million headquarters in Ft. Worth. The site at the American Airlines Center used for COVID-19 drive-thru testing was closed on June 30.

In addition to job cuts, the airlines are pushing for a new round of wage and benefit concessions from workers. Meanwhile, Delta CEO Ed Bastion got \$17.3 million in total compensation last year, American CEO

Doug Parker pocketed \$11.5 million, and United’s Oscar Munoz got \$12.4 million.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have advanced a program that calls for no return to work until conditions can be made safe. This can only be achieved through the independent actions of workers, not the pro-company unions. It means that workers must form independent rank-and-file workplace safety committees that will place safety over private profit. We urge workers interested in learning more to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The author recommends: Aviation industry workers face deep cuts to pay and hours worldwide



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact