

Delta Airlines workers expose unsafe working conditions

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COVID-19 has claimed the lives of dozens of airline workers in the United States. The exact number and circumstances are unknown, however, because the companies and unions continue to suppress this vital information.

For weeks after the pandemic began to spread in the US, the airlines refused to acknowledge that the coronavirus posed a danger to flight crews and passengers. In fact, management prohibited employees from wearing face masks or taking other basic precautions like social distancing and sanitizing.

In what amounts to a gross underestimation of the impact of the contagion, Sarah Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, told a congressional hearing last month that “hundreds of flight attendants have tested positive for the virus and 10 have lost their lives.” Nelson was referring to a report from Delta Airlines that “roughly 500” of their flight attendants had been infected and “at least 10” had died.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that during just nine days in April, there were 15 COVID-related deaths across the US airlines. These included Jet Blue employees Ralph Gismondi, a flight attendant, Kevin McAdoo, a pilot, and Jared Lovos, a human resources employee. Other victims included an American Airlines gate agent at LAX, an aircraft mechanic in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a baggage handler at Dallas-Fort Worth and a food services manager at JFK in New York. The last of those named was baggage handler Leland Jordan at JFK in New York. The April 20 *Times* article posed the obvious question, “Why are planes still flying?”

Like other industries, the official policy of the airline companies has been to conceal information about the spread of infections in order to keep selling tickets and block any action by airline workers to ground the

planes. On April 9, Delta Airlines emailed flight attendants to instruct those who had contracted the coronavirus to “refrain from notifying other crew members” or posting on social media.

Delta flight attendants, however, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* so the truth could be told. “The airlines claim to inform employees if they have been exposed by other employees. What they don’t tell you, is that by the time you get the call, two weeks have already passed,” one Delta worker said last week.

Then yesterday in Detroit, another crew member told the WSWS, “We have a flight attendant who recently passed, and we don’t know if it was related to COVID or not. When one worker dies, the company will send a condolence card, and another employee takes their place.”

To make matters worse, the corporations are preparing massive job cuts to take effect October 1 when the prohibition against layoffs under the terms CARES Act expires. This bipartisan measure, passed in April, handed the airlines a \$25 billion bailout

“We know what the CARES Act did,” the crew member continued. “That goes in the pockets of the CEO’s and the stock funds. The big corporations got it, and they are not going to give it back. We are not getting it.”

On Wednesday, United Airlines, the world’s second largest carrier, notified 36,000 employees, or 45 percent of its US workforce, that their jobs will be eliminated in October. The layoffs will hit about 15,000 flight attendants, 11,000 customer service agents and 5,500 maintenance workers. About 3,700 workers have already taken early retirements.

At Delta, at least 2,250 pilots face furloughs.

“Delta has already been pushing early retirements,” the Delta flight attendant added. “We know what is

coming.” The company employs almost 90,000 people worldwide; and analysts estimate a bloodletting in the neighborhood of 30 percent of total employment, similar to what was announced at American Airlines.

Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which includes 25,000 members at United, said the layoffs were “a gut punch” but made it clear the union would do nothing to oppose them. On the contrary, she defended the company stating the layoff announcement was “the most honest assessment we’ve seen on the state of the industry.

“Everybody can sense that something is coming,” a Delta flight attendant said. “When that \$600 a week unemployment money is ended, and the rent is due, and the layoffs hit. The pilots are going to face the same thing. We are wondering how safe we are and who’s going to have a job?”

“We heard they are relocating 90 flight attendants from JFK. But we don’t know who they are going to bump,” said the flight attendant. “The deaths of flight attendants at Delta are only one indication of the affects at every level of the aviation industry. In New York, the flight attendants, grounds handlers, and others have to take the subway trains to work. They have to risk being exposed by many other commuters.”

“We have no other choice but working while putting our lives on the line,” a co-worker added. “We are coming home to people that did not sign up for this risk.”

Workers are highly skeptical of the safety measures adopted by the carriers. There are new rules about wearing face masks at all times. But as one flight attendant explained, “The box the masks come in clearly states that they serve no protection from the COVID-19 virus. Yet we are required to wear them at all times while in public view.

“They spray the aircraft, claiming that it is a disinfectant,” she continued, “but we really don’t know what they are actually fogging the aircraft with. We wonder how long before we find out that this ‘disinfectant’ has caused more harm to our system than the virus. Once they spray the aircraft, we are told that we can enter after only two minutes, or after it dissipates. The smell it leaves has left us coughing, yet the boarding time stays the same.”

The mood among both flight crews and grounds handlers is one of apprehension and anger. “Everybody

is on eggshells waiting to see how this thing is going to drop,” said a baggage handler at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. “We need to follow suit with the autoworkers,” he said pointing to the rank-and-file safety committees set up by Fiat Chrysler (FCA) workers at two Detroit area assembly plants.

At the end of June, workers at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant and the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant stopped assembling cars when they heard there were cases of COVID-19 on the shop floor. At both plants, they launched rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, to monitor and enforce safety conditions. Many of their demands are the same that apply to airline workers, including immediate notification of any cases of COVID-19, universal testing for all workers and the right to refuse unsafe work without threat of retaliation by management and the union and until the committee decides that conditions are safe.



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