Thousands of furloughed US aviation workers see no relief from US Congress

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As of the beginning of October, over 40,000 aviation industry workers out of a total workforce of 775,000 in the US were on furlough. The largest proportion of job losses were at United and American Airlines, which had a combined 32,000 on furlough.

This is despite futile lobbying efforts by the airline unions and air carriers for the US Congress to enact a further payroll support bill. However, federal legislators have shown no interest in further aid to the airlines even as the COVID-19 pandemic surges and millions remain out of work.

To reinforce the idea that furloughs and further concessions are inevitable, the airlines have reported huge third quarter losses and predicted no early return to conditions before the pandemic.

United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby, whose company had third quarter losses of $1.8 billion, predicted the airline would return to profitability next year. However, Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly is predicting the recovery will take much longer and said on CNBC, “it may be 10 years before business travel recovers. I don't know." The airlines have had the more lucrative business travel segment collapse and have been cutting fares to attract leisure travelers combined with reduction of non-stop routes to further bolster profits.

Disregarding the surge in the coronavirus pandemic, Southwest said this week that is joining other airlines in scrapping safety precautions and planning on removing middle row seat restrictions on December 1 in order to compete with the other major airlines that have been filling their planes at close to capacity.

American Airlines saw a net loss of $2.8 billion for the last quarter. CEO Doug Parker commented on the adjustment the company has made after the massive furlough of 19,000 workers noted that new passengers were, “somewhat different from our normal clientele,” in that they are now, “leisure customers traveling to leisure destinations.”

The catastrophe facing tens of thousands of airline workers, who face the loss of their jobs and health insurance, has evoked no response from union officials except more lobbying. Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) union continues these fruitless efforts, joining with other trade union bureaucrats throughout the industry in alliance with airline executives, and industry trade groups, to call for passage of a second payroll support bill.

Nelson continues to exhort her membership to write and call their Congressional representatives to explain the hardship they are experiencing. “People are losing their homes right now; falling ill and unable to get another job without access to routine medical care that keeps chronic illness at bay and allows them to otherwise live a normal life; moving their children and all the belongings they can fit into their cars and trying to survive as single parents or two parents out of work,” she pleaded. As though the millionaires in Congress, who recently voted unanimously to hand trillions to Wall Street, were the least bit interested in the hardship facing working class families.

The major airlines are reporting that third quarter passenger service is still down over 80 percent from last year. The brunt of this crisis is being borne by rank-and-file airline workers, as it appears that there have been no pay cuts or staff reductions imposed on well-heeled union bureaucrats.

A young American Airlines machinist from the company's main hub at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, near American’s headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the challenges facing younger workers considering going into the airline industry.

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“Some were going to go into aviation but decided against it because it’s not a stable field anymore. Others, like myself, chose being a machinist because it opens more doors than just aviation.”

Speaking about the collaboration of the unions in enforcing concessions on workers, “It’s not the pandemic that has done this, it’s American’s reputation of not being stable, of making promises that are not kept. It’s having a union that doesn’t care.”

Speaking to the lack of action by the unions on the mass furloughs he said, “No response from the union or company. It’s as if they have left them out to dry per se. An example occurred when a furloughed employee was trying to fly somewhere, but were stripped of their flight benefits. That individual tried contacting both union and company to no avail. They posted on Facebook and it seems they were not the only one with the issue or issues.

“This is occurring while airline companies have been utilizing fewer planes and filling the remaining planes to fullest capacity with hardly any restrictions or precautions against the spread of the coronavirus.”

Of the union officials he said, “Don’t hardly see them on the floor. They used to come around and ask how things were going, or if we needed anything. I believe that the last time I saw a member in our area was when they handed out face wraps.”

Speaking on the upcoming US elections, he commented, “Politically, it doesn’t matter who wins. The damage has been done and I am sure it isn’t over. Four rounds of furloughed employees, and with a net loss of $2.8 billion, there are bound to be more furloughs coming.”

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