

FAA clears Boeing's deadly 737 Max 8 aircraft to fly again

Bryan Dyne
19 November 2020

On Wednesday, the Federal Aviation Administration rescinded its order to ground the now infamous 737 Max 8 aircraft, along with its sister model, the 737 Max 9. The agency originally grounded the Max 8 more than 20 months ago after two crashes—Lion Air Flight 610 in October 2018 in Indonesia, and Ethiopian Airlines 302 in March 2019—killed 346 men, women and children.

Wall Street also celebrated the announcement, with Boeing stock jumping six percent Wednesday morning. Boeing's stock as a whole has risen nearly 40 percent since its most recent low on October 30, on the assumption that the Max 8 was coming back to service. CEO David Calhoun is expected to make about \$11 million this year in salary, stock options and other bonuses, plus an additional \$7 million if the Max fully re-enters service. The company's shareholders stand to make tens of billions more if their Boeing stock returns to its pre-grounding highs.

Airlines are also banking on the return of the Max 8. In anticipation of getting full authorization to use the aircraft, American Airlines was the first airline to announce a return to service for the beleaguered jet, scheduling a once-a-day round trip flight for the Max 8 from New York to Miami and back, starting December 29. Southwest and United have announced plans to start Max 8 commercial flights sometime next year.

To date, no executive who oversaw production of the plane or regulatory official who approved it has been charged, much less prosecuted, for the development, manufacture and marketing of the deadly plane and the death of 346 passengers and crew on the two flights. Ex-CEO Dennis Muilenburg, who spearheaded the development and production of the 737 Max project, left the company in January of this year with salary, stock options and bonuses totaling \$80.7 million.

The FAA action is the last major hurdle needed for

the Max 8 jet to return to service in US airlines. Alongside the announcement, the FAA also released the design changes that will need to be implemented on each aircraft before it is approved for airworthiness. These include updated hardware and software and a new pilot training regimen that has yet to be approved, as well as maintenance for the 850 aircraft that have been sitting idle for more than a year and a half.

The order also revealed the continued complicity of the FAA with the corporate criminality of Boeing. The agency claims it worked “diligently to identify and address the safety issues” surrounding the hardware and software that were the direct cause of the two crashes. Calhoun shed crocodile tears for the victims, proclaiming, “We will never forget the lives lost in the two tragic accidents that led to the decision to suspend operation.” But no one took stock of the fact that Boeing knew of the dangers posed by the plane and hid them from pilots and the general public, all the while getting a rubber stamp to proceed from the FAA and the pilots' union.

To review, the immediate cause of both crashes was the previously little-known mechanism called the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). The software was installed to compensate for the plane's inherent tendency to stall, a potentially catastrophic problem which still remains, and was given the authority to override pilot controls if the system deemed it necessary. Moreover, Boeing ultimately gave MCAS ten times the control over the pitch of the plane than it told test pilots, meaning it could easily crash the plane given faulty inputs.

This is exactly what happened in both crashes; each plane's angle of attack sensor wrongly indicated a stall and because only a single sensor was tied to MCAS, rather than the industry standard of two or three for

redundancy to prevent such problems, the software forced both flights into an unrecoverable dive. Black box recordings of the pilots bear this out, as they tried to pull up or disable MCAS during the last moments of their lives.

Moreover, Boeing knew of these dangers and concealed them from test pilots during the Max 8's certification. Mark Forkner, Boeing's chief technical pilot at the time of the aircraft's development, called MCAS "egregious" and noted that it was "running rampant" in Boeing's simulators, causing crashes. Leaked internal emails showed employees incredulous at the development of the Max 8, commenting, "This is a joke. This airplane is ridiculous." A different message exclaimed, "I'll be shocked if the FAA passes this turd."

During this same period, one of the aerospace giant's former senior managers, Ed Pierson, wrote a letter directly to then-CEO Muilenburg warning that "deteriorating factory conditions" at the Renton, Washington Boeing 737 production facility would inevitably produce faulty and potentially deadly aircraft. Both sets of reports were ignored and the production and distribution of the Max 8 went on full steam ahead.

Moreover, Boeing did not warn pilots of the possibility that the MCAS system caused the first crash, even though the system was suspect at the time. Instead, they worked behind the scenes to release a software patch in an attempt to hide the fact that there was an issue in the first place. In a tragic irony, they announced this fix, admitting this deadly problem existed in the first place, the day after the second crash.

That such alarms were never raised comes strictly down to profit considerations. Boeing was particularly concerned with maintaining its edge in a competitive race against its European-based rival Airbus to maintain and strengthen its dominance of the market for short- and mid-range aircraft, particularly in the rapidly expanding Asian market. Airbus had a one-year jump over Boeing in the development and production of its new plane, the A320neo aircraft.

To compensate, Boeing wanted to continue using the 50-year-old 737 chassis in developing a "new" plane, to cut down on development time and production costs. As the National Transportation Safety Committee of Indonesia explicitly noted during its investigation of the

Lion Air Flight 610 crash, the aerospace giant used an old airframe in order to save time and money, developing an airplane that did not have "significant areas of change at the product level," and used MCAS to ensure that there would not be "a simulator training requirement for pilots."

The dangers outlined in that report, along with numerous congressional hearings, have been ignored by US airlines in favor of the empty promises from Boeing and the FAA that the Max 8 is now living up to its mandate of being "one of the safest airplanes ever to fly." They, along with the company, regulators and trade unions that allowed the Max 8 crashes, are the ones who ultimately killed the first 346 victims, and will be responsible for all those that follow.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact