

Boeing 737-500 crashes after takeoff from Jakarta, Indonesia

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Contact was lost on Saturday with a Boeing 737-500 jet, Sriwijaya Air flight SJ-182, four minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, Indonesia. Recovery teams have begun to recover wreckage, including the plane's two black boxes.

Rescue divers have also started bringing body bags to the surface. It is expected that DNA sampling will confirm that all 62 passengers and crew of the flight were killed in the crash.

Initial witness reports indicate that part of the jet exploded. These reports coincide with a sharp turn by the plane followed by a plunge of more than 10,000 feet in the span of some 60 seconds, recorded by the air traffic tracking website Flightradar24.

The crash is the third of a Boeing 737 class aircraft in 27 months. While there is as yet no definitive information on what caused the most recent crash, it is possible that the age of the Boeing 737 model played a significant role. The 737 airframe is 50 years old. As a cost-cutting measure, Boeing continues to add new features to this model instead of designing and producing a new aircraft.

The tragedy coincides with a \$2.5 billion legal settlement between Boeing and the US Department of Justice over two recent crashes of 737 Max 8 planes. The first, Lion Air Flight 610, occurred in October, 2018, also outside of Jakarta. The second, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, crashed in March of 2019. Both 737 Max crashes occurred several minutes after take-off, killing a combined total of 346 men, women and children.

The settlement in the 737 Max crashes involves the dropping of criminal charges alleging that Boeing defrauded the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and worked throughout the development and production of the Max 8 to conceal deadly design

flaws. The most infamous of these involves the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) software, which was installed to compensate for the Max 8's tendency to stall, an inherent flaw caused by adding new and larger engines to an outdated airframe.

The settlement is part of a massive whitewash and coverup of criminal negligence on the part of the company and its top executives, aided and abetted by the FAA. The lives of hundreds of passengers and crew were sacrificed to the drive of the giant airplane manufacturer and defense contractor to cut corners on safety for the sake of market share and profits.

The settlement, however, does allow for criminal charges to be brought against Boeing employees. David Burns, an acting assistant attorney general, claimed that "This resolution holds Boeing accountable for its employees' criminal misconduct, addresses the financial impact to Boeing's airline customers, and hopefully provides some measure of compensation to the crash victims' families and beneficiaries."

Federal prosecutors issued summonses early last year to several Boeing employees to appear before a grand jury on charges of lying to the FAA about the MCAS software. These employees may include Mark Forkner, Boeing's chief technical pilot at the time, who called MCAS "egregious," and said it was "running rampant" in Boeing's simulators, causing crashes.

Many others, including Forkner's colleague Patrick Gustavsson, were aware of the flaws in the design of the aircraft. In internal messages, one worker proposed darkly that one could avoid the dangers of the Max 8 by committing suicide. He wrote: "Get silencer, put on end of gun, place adjacent to temple, and pull trigger—the problems stop. At this point, how can they consider continuing?"

Any guilt on the part of Boeing's lower echelon employees pales in comparison to that of the company's top executives, up to and including ex-CEO Dennis Muilenburg, who oversaw the final development and initial production of the Max 8. Documents that have been revealed through internal leaks and congressional hearings indicate that Muilenburg was very aware of the fatal design flaws of the Max 8, and did everything he could to keep the FAA, pilots and the general public in the dark about these dangers.

Instead of jail time, Muilenburg was rewarded for his time at Boeing with \$80.9 million in salary and bonuses. He has since joined the Silicon Valley startup Monarch Tractor as an adviser and investor.

The Justice Department will not impose an independent monitor to ensure that Boeing adheres to the terms of the agreement. It claims that "the misconduct was neither pervasive across the organization, nor undertaken by a large number of employees."

This free pass for the entire upper echelon of Boeing executives, most of whom are still with the company, speaks to the importance of Boeing to American capitalism. The company is one of the world's largest aerospace manufacturers and America's second largest defense contractor. It also plays a leading role in securing the interests of the American ruling elite abroad through its competition with European-based rival Airbus.

The dropping of criminal charges underscores as well the criminality that pervades the operations of American capitalism and its oligarchic ruling class.

The monetary penalty is a slap on the wrist for the aerospace giant. Of the \$2.5 billion it will be forced to pay, \$244 million will be paid to the federal government as a fine. Only \$500 million will go to the families of those who died, a mere \$1.4 million per person. Boeing will pay more than three times that amount, \$1.77 billion, to the airlines that were unable to use or take deliveries of the Max 8 during the plane's grounding, which began in March 2019 and lasted until November.

The cost of the settlement to Boeing is in addition to more than \$18 billion in losses caused by the 737 Max 8 grounding. The company is expected to lose even more due to the impact on the airline industry in 2020

of the coronavirus pandemic. Boeing lost more than 1,000 orders for the Max 8 last year, though it still has more than 4,000 orders outstanding.

However, the US government and the Federal Reserve have handed Boeing many billions of dollars in the form of subsidies and low-interest bond purchases as part of the multi-trillion-dollar CARES Act corporate bailout.

The settlement does not resolve claims brought by the families of those aboard Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, who have stated that the agreement between Boeing and the US government represents only "the tip of the iceberg of Boeing's wrongdoing."



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