

Growing strike actions among US airline workers against low pay, terrible working conditions

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Around the country, increasing numbers of airport workers are striking or pushing for strike action to oppose low wage pay, safety issues persisting in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and minimal staffing levels. The struggles, taken by airport janitors, food service workers, handicap assistants, and flight attendants, are part of a struggle being conducted by wide layers of the working class internationally.

Airport workers are on the front line of a struggle against not only miserable pay and poor working conditions, but against the spread of the coronavirus pandemic across regions and national boundaries, which has been made significantly worse by the premature rush by businesses and governments at the national and local level to reopen public places.

US airlines have received over \$74 billion in bailout money from the US government during the pandemic. Airline stocks shot up upon hearing last month's announcement by the Biden administration that it was loosening health restrictions on international travel, opening up travel into the country for all fully-vaccinated foreign visitors. "The full reopening of international travel is... critical to reviving economies around the globe," stated Nicholas Calio, president of the lobbying group Airlines for America, in response to the White House's decision.

Airport workers are facing pressure to work not only from management and the government, but also the unions. While a number of workplace actions have taken place, the unions have lent crucial support to the reopening of the American economy during the holiday season, in spite of a growing winter surge in cases.

On Saturday, over 350 janitors representing the airport custodian service Flagship Facility Services

went on a day-long strike at the Denver International Airport after months of negotiations between Service Employees International Union Local 105 and management.

Luis Gonzalez, a striking airport worker, told Denver's ABC News affiliate that workers were primarily concerned about "fair wages and workloads ... [We keep] this place running. We put ourselves at risk every day, and we deserve to be able to put food on the table for the holidays."

According to the job site Indeed, Flagship Facility Service janitors make on average of \$12.72 per hour. A review of a janitorial position offered by the company in Salt Lake City, Utah gives the job one star out of five. "The nepotism is how they hand out job assignments," says the reviewer, adding, "the managers are lazy & are the biggest hypocrites." A Spanish-speaking reviewer rates a job in San Diego, California with one star as well. In reference to a question about the job's benefits, the reviewer replies "ninguna" ("none").

The strike at Denver was shut down by Local 105 after it announced a tentative agreement which it claimed was a "major achievement" in wages and workloads, according to the local's president.

It is nothing of the sort. The deal includes a paltry \$4 wage increase spread out over three years, as well as commitments to increased staffing and time off. While Local 105 president Ron Ruggiero touted this agreement as halting "40 years of wage stagnation," the average wage of the custodial workers will still be a little more than \$16 an hour. This will amount to \$33,536 in annual wages for a full-time worker, less than half the \$72,000 average wage in Denver,

Colorado, according to *Payscale.com*.

Worker at other facilities are pressing for action against the airport industry in the days leading up to the holiday season. On Thursday, wheelchair aides at Orlando International Airport protested poor staffing levels, lack of sick pay and a poverty-level wage of only \$8 an hour. The workers are employed by BAGS, Inc., a contractor working with both Frontier and American Airlines.

Workers at Tampa International Airport also protested abysmal conditions last week. “I help elderly and disabled passengers every day and yet, I am only paid \$7 per hour. What if I do not make enough tips to put dinner on the table?” said Addis Abebe to Tampa’s *CBS* local affiliate. The protests in Tampa and Orlando were both called by the SEIU.

According to *CBSNews*, “Airlines rely on airport contractors to provide key services like baggage handlers, wheelchair agents, and other positions. Workers say competitive contract bidding has resulted in plummeting wages and disappearing benefits.”

Food court workers at Phoenix, Arizona’s Sky Harbor Airport who are organized by Unite Here Local 11 launched a week-long strike on Monday, which is set to last throughout the Thanksgiving holiday.

The strike is against understaffing, low pay and health insurance coverage at concessions operator HMSHost. Workers carried out a similar work stoppage in September. At that time, workers protested against poor staffing levels which have “been a continual problem in recent months,” states *AZCentral*. “Passenger traffic and thus demand for concessions has robustly returned to nearly pre-pandemic levels, but airport concessionaires have struggled to fill positions to meet that demand,” says the publication.

Last month, 350 flight attendants voted 100 percent to authorize strike action against Piedmont Airlines, a subsidiary of American Airlines, which provides 400 flights per day on the East Coast under the American Eagle brand. Air flight attendants for Piedmont have base pay nearly half (\$16,500) of the normal amount for workers in the industry.

Last Thursday, the AFA-CWA held an hour-long protest outside of Charlotte International Airport in North Carolina. Despite the immense leverage these workers hold and the capacity to link their struggles to others in the industry, the AFA-CWA continues to keep

flight attendants on the job while the union holds negotiations with Piedmont, calling for no actions which would undermine holiday travel. Piedmont flight attendants have not had a new contract in three years.



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