

# “It’s been three years of hell”: An air flight attendant’s fight to expose Southwest Airlines’ poisoning of its workforce

Nick Barrickman  
2 December 2021

In mid-November, the *World Socialist Web Site* was contacted by Tonya Osborne, a Southwest Airlines flight attendant from Orlando, Florida. A flight attendant for over 20 years, Osborne has been left on the brink of poverty after suffering a series of health complications brought on by the uniforms her company has forced her to wear.

In 2017, Southwest introduced a new 75-piece uniform. According to a 2016 article in the *Chicago Business Journal*, “[t]he new look ... is in stark contrast to the famously skimpy miniskirts and hot pants in shades of orange and tan worn by Southwest’s female flight attendants in the 1970s.” The article mentions that Cintas has contracted with United for new uniforms and that other “major domestic carriers” were redesigning their outfits. However, shortly afterward flight attendants across the company began reporting severe health complications associated with the uniforms.

The situation at Southwest is almost identical to those at several other US-based carriers in recent years, including American, Alaska and Delta. In addition to Cintas, at least two other uniform manufacturers, Land’s End and Twin Hill, have been implicated. In 2019, flight attendants who spoke to the WSWWS reported an “awful fishy, chemical smell” in their uniforms. Even after several washes, the chemical-scented clothes produced massive skin irritation and other painful reactions.

According to Osborne, the chemical treatment in her clothing was so severe that even brushing up next to a colleague at work would trigger a reaction.

Osborne has been diagnosed with several autoimmune disorders, including inflammatory polyarthropathy, a form of arthritis; ankylosing spondylitis, affecting the spine, and psoriatic arthritis due to chemicals present in her work uniform. Other colleagues she was in touch with had reported skin rashes, hair loss as well as Hashimoto’s disease, a condition attacking the thyroid gland which can alter the human body’s hormone production and can lead to fatigue and rapid weight gain.

In league with her fellow co-workers, Osborne has initiated a class-action lawsuit against the Ohio-based industrial uniform contractor Cintas, which she is encouraging other similarly-affected workers to join. The lawsuit alleges that “Since the introduction of the Uniforms in 2017, Southwest employees ... immediately began suffering a myriad of health problems” such as “itchiness, rashes, hives, coughing, trouble breathing, tightness of the chest, hair loss, ear pain, blurry vision, anxiety, and lethargy.”

The lawsuit alleges “[o]ther Southwest employees fear reprimand and are hesitant to complain about their Uniforms, instead choosing to suffer in silence.” Up to 20,000 Southwest employees are estimated to be wearing the uniforms.

“I’ve lost everything,” she said to the WSWWS, adding “it’s been like three years of hell.” Osborne has remained out of work since 2018,

drawing money from her 401(k) and other sources while living in a mobile recreational vehicle to save expenses after she was advised not to wear the outfit by her doctors.

In addition to severe skin reactions and arthritis, Osborne reported a torn cornea earlier that year, as well as migraine headaches and sinus infections. “Some days I feel like I’m 95 [years old]” due to problems with her joints and back, she explained.

After going through several skin biopsies in 2018, Osborne’s dermatologist submitted a letter to Southwest in September that year warning them about the outfits. In it, the doctor explained that if the flight attendant “continues to wear the uniform, she will continue to have a severe rash that may reduce her ability to perform her duties.”

According to the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, which covered Osborne’s story in early 2020, “[t]o avoid using up her sick leave, Osborne paid other flight attendants to pick up her scheduled flights. She spent hundreds of dollars giving away her trips...”

## The 2018 meeting at Southwest headquarters and the mysterious “toxicology report”

In late November 2018, Osborne, along with several other flight attendants and a representative of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 556 met with Southwest executives at the corporation’s headquarters in Dallas, Texas. Rather than being an honest effort to address concerns, the meeting’s goal was to deflect inquiries, she said.

This meeting was part of a series of exercises in deception. Southwest’s public spokespeople referred to the meeting as an effort to “share ... independent lab results with employees,” which would put concerns to rest. However, several things did not add up. First, company executives regularly alluded to the existence of a toxicology report, which supposedly debunked claims of toxic chemicals being used in clothing, but would not produce it.

According to Osborne, company representatives led her and other meeting participants to believe that a “four-inch thick” stack of papers on their desk was the full toxicology report, showing all components and methods used in the uniforms’ production. Her questions about specific chemical compounds in the uniforms went unanswered.

Other things disturbed her. Meeting participants were shown a single-sheet “pass/fail” chart which marked several uniform components as “fail.” She was told not to be alarmed by this. At the end of the meeting, Osborne and the others were instructed to return their copies of the pass/fail sheet.

Revealing the real business interests at stake, Mike Sims, Southwest's director of in-flight operations, expressed concern that putting out a memo warning all employees about the potential hazards of the clothing would "create more problems" and jeopardize the airline's \$11 million contract with Cintas.

Osborne recalled pleading with the company executives at the meeting, explaining that she was "losing everything" while she sat out from work. Her impression of Sims and the other corporate executives was that "they didn't care."

According to the *Inquirer* article, rather than warning workers about the garments, company officials "suggested that the flight attendants use up their uniform allotment, and give those pieces away to coworkers to deplete the current stock faster." Osborne and the others rejected this on principle, as they were not about to pass out contaminated clothing to those around them.

Following the meeting, alternative clothing items were suggested by the airline which produced similar reactions. "They [Southwest] claim that cotton-based alternatives are available ... those pieces are also chemically-treated," she explained. Like her questions at the Dallas meeting, a letter from her dermatologist to Southwest asking about the chemical compounds used in her uniform went similarly unanswered.

"It's whatever's cheap," Judith Anderson, an industrial hygienist working for the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), told the *Inquirer* about present US policy for chemical use in clothing. Irina Mordukhovich of Harvard's T.S. Chan School of Public Health has stated that the use of chemicals in clothing in the United States is "very unregulated and un-researched."

Mordukhovich headed up a 10-year study published in *Environmental Health* in 2018 involving over 5,000 flight attendants. The study found that airline workers "had higher rates of many cancers, including breast cancer and melanoma, compared to the general population."

Osborne's outfits were contaminated with fluorinated compounds, or PFAs, toxins which can cause "health and ecosystem harm," according to *Environmental Science and Technology Letters*. The journal calls for "better regulation ... to limit the widespread use of PFAs."

The AFA has conducted testing on the industry's uniforms which has found "formaldehyde ... along with sensitizers, which cause allergic reactions, and endocrine disruptors, which can mimic hormones and signal to the body to stop making ... estrogen." An independent lab testing of Southwest's uniforms found "benzyl alcohol, a skin and respiratory irritant, as well as 'elevated' levels of 14 heavy metals, such as aluminum, chromium, arsenic, mercury, and lead." These chemicals can produce "asthma, bronchitis or even chemically-induced pneumonia."

## The role of COVID-19

Today, nearly two years after the *Inquirer* article, Osborne still remains in her RV, having been diagnosed as disabled and eligible to collect Social Security. "I've battled, and battled, and battled," she said. The autoimmune disorders with which she and other airline workers have been diagnosed can only have increased the dangers of working on the job during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I'm immune compromised," she stated, adding that she was "definitely concerned" about catching COVID-19 if she returned to work in her condition. In August, various news outlets reported the death a 36-year-old double-vaccinated Southwest flight attendant named Maurice "Reggie" Shepperson. According to *USA Today*, Shepperson "took every precaution, wearing a mask, constantly washing his hands, sanitizing surfaces and wiping everything down in hotel rooms" but still contracted

the virus. "Could he have been compromised [by his uniform]?" wondered Osborne.

According to records kept by the AFA, nearly 4,000 flight attendants have caught COVID-19 and 20 have died. It is almost certain these numbers have increased following the reopening of international air travel to fully vaccinated passengers. According to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), 20 million passengers traveled on flights the weekend before Thanksgiving, "a figure approaching prepandemic levels," states the *New York Times*.

While many governments announced immediate travel restrictions on flights from southern Africa following the discovery of the Omicron variant, it is likely that such measures have come too late, as the variant has been detected throughout the planet in only a few short weeks.

## The role of the trade unions and the significance of independent rank and file committees

Osborne noted the presence of a TWU representative at the 2018 Southwest corporate meeting. According to the flight attendant, during this initial meeting the workers were led to believe something would be done to aid their situation.

"They acted like they wanted to help at the beginning," she said of the TWU. The representative told her to have an attorney contact one of the union's legal advisers. But "They blew my attorney off" in response to her outreach, she said.

The TWU, an organization with nearly 140,000 members throughout the US and over \$107 million in assets, suddenly had no time for an issue it later claimed it had received "hundreds" of complaints about in the 2020 *Inquirer* report. To Osborne, the union claimed the impact to be too minor to merit a response.

This stance is undermined by wider developments in the airline industry. In addition to workers at Southwest, recent lawsuits initiated by workers at Delta Airlines against the same conditions show that these are not isolated problems. The AFA has testified to the widespread character of this crisis. "Workers are afraid to speak out" Osborne asserted, adding that the TWU was "supposed to have our backs and in the end, they only stabbed us in it. Why do you pay \$50 a month for an organization that does that?"

"They are supposed to represent you regardless of whether only 1 percent of the workforce is affected or not. The union dropped the ball [in my case]," Osborne said. "They're in the pocket of Southwest Airlines. Why else would they have dropped the ball?"

The pro-company stance of the TWU is of a piece with its collaboration with the transportation industry throughout the pandemic. Just last month, the TWU worked to prevent a potential strike of over 5,000 South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) workers over low pay, maternity leave and COVID-19 compensation to families who have lost members employed by the transit authority.

The TWU jettisoned its demands for compensation and wage increases above inflation to accommodate SEPTA and call off the strike. This was despite SEPTA workers being in a position not only to shut down business and travel in the Philadelphia region weeks before the holidays, but also to link up their struggles with striking John Deere workers, Kellogg's workers, Dana Corporation workers, Scranton teachers as well as Piedmont Airlines flight attendants at the Philadelphia International Airport, represented by the AFA.

For its part, the AFA has taken positions essentially indistinguishable from the airlines' lobbyists, starting from the first weeks of the pandemic, begging for corporate bailouts to keep the companies afloat while tying

workers' fates to the fortunes of the airline operators. AFA president and Democratic Socialists of America member Sara Nelson, who was briefly considered as a possible president of the AFL-CIO labor federation following the death of Richard Trumka in August, served on the Biden campaign team, helping to swallow up mass opposition to the Trump administration's criminal pandemic response and smothering it in the embrace of the capitalist two-party system.

Meanwhile, the unions have abandoned any public mention of the ongoing uniform crisis. The last reference to toxic uniforms on the AFA's website appeared October 31, 2019, four months before the first lockdowns in the United States, according to the site's search function.

There is enormous potential for a joint struggle uniting workers across the global airline industry. Over the course of this year alone there have been significant protests and job actions by airport and airline workers, including, most recently, a strike by hundreds of custodians at Denver International Airport, a 100 percent strike authorization vote by flight attendants at Piedmont Airlines, a subsidiary of American Airlines. Earlier in the year, airport workers in Frankfurt, Germany staged a hunger strike against layoffs by an airport contractor and flight attendants in Russia carried out sickouts against Rossiya Airlines.

But to realize this potential requires that flight attendants, terminal workers and other workers throughout the industry must take the initiative out of the hands of the pro-company unions and organize themselves in a network of rank-and-file committees.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been assisting workers throughout the country in building such committees in order to fight the betrayals of the unions and unite with workers around the world. "I'm all for workers taking over and kicking these so-called unions to the curb," Tonya said. "I'm not afraid of them, they caused me to lose everything."

Airline workers who want to learn about rank-and-file committees can contact the WSWS by filling out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**