

“They are killing us”: More flight attendants speak out about poisoned job uniforms

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Since reporting last week about the situation facing Tonya Osborne, an out of work flight attendant from Southwest Airlines who has been forced to take medical leave due to toxins in her job uniform, several other flight attendants have reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site* to speak about similar experiences.

“This is a major scandal,” said Meagan, a fellow flight attendant from Southwest. Meagan has nearly 25 years on the job in her profession and has also signed onto Osborne’s class action lawsuit against Southwest. Meagan told the WSWs that about “90 percent of the time while at work” she meets at least one person in uniform who she can see is visibly reacting to the toxic outfits produced by outfitting firm Cintas.

Meagan says she has suffered immensely since the 2017 launch of Cintas’ clothing, which has led to devastating health impacts. When the uniforms were first unveiled in 2017, Meagan stated that she was reticent to switch to the “recycled plastic” outfits.

“There were reactions [to the uniforms] almost immediately,” she said. Southwest held “uniform try-on events” in which “hundreds” of people would be wearing the uniforms. Meagan tried not to join the chorus line after having heard about the experiences of American Airline employees, who had launched a lawsuit in 2018 over adverse health effects caused by Lands’ End uniforms.

“I’ve never had a problem with sensitivity” to fabric before, Meagan told the WSWs. However, Cintas’ outfits are not like other outfits. Megan explained that she had been forced to don the company’s “Eco Wear” uniforms in summer of 2018 after resisting them for a time. Marketed as “100% recycled polyester produced entirely from post-consumer waste,” the corporation claims that “one single suit is made out of approximately 25 recycled 2-liter plastic bottles.”

“They say that it is saving the environment,” Meagan said. But in reality, “they are killing us,” she said. The flight attendant told a harrowing tale about the conditions which developed upon her first interactions with the uniforms in 2018.

The veteran flight attendant suffered in the initial stages from “red bumps” on her back, which she explained as being caused by the contact that the outfit has with her skin as she was sitting. “There is little ventilation while you are sitting and since the outfits don’t breathe at all, you tend to sweat,” she said. Perspiration in turn interacts with the chemicals in the outfits, releasing even more of them into the skin.

The bump issue soon progressed. “I started to notice that I had a lot of hair falling out whenever I showered,” she explained. “Not just the normal amount that any woman has happen.” After about two months, Meagan noticed she had developed a bald spot.

“I freaked,” she said. Meagan called her hair stylist who explained that he had seen that she had a bald spot in previous visits but didn’t want to say anything that would make her feel bad.

According to an earlier report in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the Cintas uniforms have tested positive for “14 heavy metals, such as aluminum, chromium, arsenic, mercury, and lead.”

Of just these named chemicals, chromium, which *WebMD* says “is a known toxin that can cause skin problems and lung cancer,” arsenic and mercury have been known to cause hair loss when ingested.

Unlike Osborne, who has been out of work since 2018 and has not had to face the “twin pandemic” of toxic uniforms accompanied by COVID-19; Meagan worked throughout 2020 and 2021. “We need our immune system now more than ever,” she exclaimed, stating that her doctor had told her that the impact of

the toxic uniforms had left her body “totally taxed.”

Another flight attendant previously employed by Delta Airlines told the WSWS that their experience with the clothing firm Lands’ End was very similar to the others. She stated that a previous experience with the company’s Passport Plum uniforms resulted in skin rashes after only a handful of uses.

“It was around Christmas in 2019,” she said that the reactions began. “The company made me jump through all sorts of hoops” but that she was able to track down a company representative who was willing to help her find out the content of her uniform so that one tailored to her needs could be found.

“Within two weeks,” she said, a class-action lawsuit by nearly 2,000 Delta employees was filed and became public, immediately halting her employer’s willingness to cooperate. Essentially, they were left in the dark about the strange, “stinking ” uniforms which had been forced upon her.

According to Meagan, the Southwest flight attendant, the airline introduced the Accommodations and Career Transition Team (ACT) Team in early 2018 to field all of the employee requests for new uniforms. “They require you fill out forms and all sorts of things” in order to obtain an exemption, she said. “Doctors feel nervous, they think they’re going to be involved in a lawsuit” for helping their patients.

A worker shared the three-page document, which asks the person applying for alternative clothing to authorize the release of medical information as well as detail the type of “impairment” they are suffering from, what job duties this has affected the specific type of accommodation being requested. It goes without saying that an employee suffering from an unknown chemical reaction is guessing in the dark about what might better accommodate them.

“They used to let us source our own uniforms but now they aren’t letting us,” she said. As with the Lands’ End uniforms at Delta, which the corporation admits cost the company over \$20 million to obtain; Cintas and Southwest have embarked upon an \$11 million deal which is jeopardized by every employee that exempts themselves from the new uniforms.

“It breaks my heart,” said Meagan of the multiple lawsuits which have been settled establishing the poisonous character of the flight attendants’ uniforms. “I thought they [Southwest] cared about me.”

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), which officially represents Southwest’s 20,000 flight attendants, “acted like they’d help for five or six months,” but then stopped returning emails. “It’s like the company got to them and said ‘stay out of this,’” she said.

Southwest flight attendants have been working without a contract since November 2018. Rather than demanding an absolute halt to all air traffic until flight attendants have their health accommodated for and other acceptable terms, the TWU, like the “bargaining representatives” in other industries, has worked to stifle even the slightest independent activity of the workforce.

In the face of economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, this has only become more pronounced. Organizations such as the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) and the TWU live by the mantra laid out by Nicolas Calio of the Airlines for America lobby group in October: “The full reopening of ... travel is ... critical to reviving economies around the globe.”

This is despite reports in the industry publication *Paddle Your Own Kano* that flight attendants’ morale was the “lowest ever within recent memory.” According to the publication, the AFA representative at Alaska Airlines “cited the Omicron variant and other possible future pandemic developments” as the main sources of worker unrest.



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