

“They gave me a life-changing illness”

Flight attendants say US airlines forced them to wear toxic uniforms even after symptoms emerged

Nick Barrickman
20 December 2021

An increasing number of flight attendants have reached out to the *World Socialist Web Site* following the publication of an initial report earlier this month on the struggles of Tonya Osborne to expose Southwest Airlines’ use of toxic work outfits.

Osborne, a flight attendant for nearly two decades, had developed several major autoimmune disorders since Southwest introduced corporate outfitter Cintas’ redesigned clothing in 2017. Her struggle, which she likened to “three years of hell,” is part of a crisis facing a growing number of employees who had adverse reactions to Cintas’ supposedly “environmentally friendly” outfits.

“I didn’t even think about it at first,” said Drew, a flight attendant at Southwest with nearly 10 years on the job, who asked that his name be changed to protect his identity. It was only after hearing numerous other horror stories at Southwest and other airline companies that he thought twice.

Drew learned that the materials used for “bold, new” uniforms being modeled at mass wear testing events had been exchanged for cheaper materials once approved by Southwest. “They are all about that dollar,” he said.

Cintas saw a massive growth in revenue following the introduction of its clothing line. According to company figures, the outfitter’s revenue in 2017 was \$5.32 billion. However, from 2018 to 2021, its revenue shot up by nearly \$2 billion, to \$7.12 billion in 2021.

According to independent lab testing, Southwest’s uniforms contained large quantities of benzyl alcohol, formaldehyde, “heavy metals,” including aluminum, chromium, arsenic, mercury and lead, as well as other toxic compounds. A previous Southwest flight attendant, Meagan, told the WSWs that the mixture of these chemicals caused massive hair loss.

Jodi, another Southwest flight attendant who spoke to the WSWs under an assumed name, said she would not have

known the sorts of materials that went into her outfit if she had not visited an oncologist for symptoms related to emphysema.

Like other Southwest flight attendants who spoke to the WSWs, Drew and Jodi initially developed a rash on their arms and legs from contact with the new uniforms. Drew’s dermatologist asked to see a piece of his new outfit, promptly informed him that his new clothing was not made of fabric but plastic. “I was told ‘do *not* put that on again,’” he said.

“My air passages would close up” with the uniform on, he said. “It makes it impossible to swallow water. One sip would feel like one gallon, and it wouldn’t die down until I took the outfit off for 72 hours.”

Drew said he had good results from blood work “for years and years” before donning the outfit. By the time he was able to determine with help from a doctor the source of his health problems, “it was too late.” He had developed a rare form of leukemia, a lifelong condition which had no basis in previous family history. “I have cancer,” he stated. “I’ll never be able to get rid of it.”

He is a party to the lawsuit which Osborne has brought against Cintas. “I want them to take responsibility and give us uniforms that don’t kill us,” he said of the outfitter and his employer. “They gave me a life-changing illness.”

Drew is limited in the ways to treat his illness because receiving chemotherapy would effectively end his career. “I still work,” he explained. “They want us to go away, but I will never leave. Even if they pay me \$5 million I’m not going to quit that job. They’re going to have to see my face every single day to know they did this to me.”

In previous discussions, flight attendants spoke about the Accommodations and Career Transition (ACT) Team, which Southwest Airlines set up in 2018 to deal with all employee requests for new uniforms. Meagan, an airline worker who

previously spoke to the WSWS, noted the ever-expanding list of criteria workers and their physicians must provide to receive an accommodation regarding their clothing.

“They don’t make it easy for us,” said Drew. “At first, I called Cintas to try and find non-chemically treated clothing,” he said. He did not get far with the company, as he discovered “nothing leaves that company without having been chemically-treated.”

To fully stock his work wardrobe, Drew had to find acceptable alternative sources for multiple items of clothing. “You must provide links as well as a snap shot of the clothing article” to the ACT Team, he said. Once a clothing article is approved, which takes weeks at a time, a worker has to hope that what remains of his yearly stipend can cover the costs. “Some of these retailers can go into the hundreds of dollars,” he said.

According to a receipt provided to the WSWS, a single pair of slacks from J.C. Penney cost \$72. Short sleeve shirts purchased from Amazon.com cost \$15 each. Osborne’s outfit was over \$500, including several items which she rated “highly toxic.” She and many others also had large expenses for “undergarments to help prevent the uniform from touching the skin.”

Drew’s pants are “dry clean only” and were not reimbursed by Southwest. Due to his participation in Tonya Osborne’s class action lawsuit against the company, Cintas has blocked him from his account on its website. This has barred him from knowing the actual amount of money he has available at any given time to purchase clothes with his company stipend.

Another flight attendant named Jodi explained to the WSWS that she is afraid of not receiving reimbursement at all from the company because she bought alternative clothing articles without receiving a confirmation from Southwest.

“I used to get stopped all the time at work,” Drew said. “A base manager would ask ‘what are you doing out of uniform?’ I just got used to carrying my card on my person,” he said, to avoid the hassle of explaining his situation to every company manager.

Like Osborne, Drew participated in a series of meetings held by Southwest on the many complaints about the outfits. The WSWS previously described Southwest’s public relations efforts as “exercises in deception.” Drew had even harsher words to describe the company’s attempts at damage control.

He recalled a revealing exchange between the flight attendants and Mike Sims, the director of in-flight operations. “This isn’t some sort of smoke and mirrors. We’re not trying to kill you!” he recalled Sims suddenly exclaiming.

“Why would he feel the need to say that?” Drew asked this reporter.

In fact, flight attendants have been placed on the front lines of a “twin pandemic,” the results of being forced to wear toxic uniforms which are known to “totally tax” their immune system even as the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads through packed airplanes.

“They are basically saying we have to wear the masks, and that’s it,” Jodi said about her employer’s COVID-19 protections. According to the airline worker, flight attendants are only required to tell passengers once if a passenger’s mask is below the nose or worn improperly but are not allowed to “badger” passengers about it. Passengers quickly learn this limitation, and some just carry on the way they want.

Even though the more infectious Omicron variant has rapidly become dominant in the US, the Biden administration and airlines bosses are not discouraging travel during the Christmas holidays. They are driven not by health but by profit concerns.

Due to the increased dangers, many airline workers are refusing to work during the high-volume season. On Wednesday, the Associated Press reported that “airlines are having trouble hiring pilots, flight attendants and other personnel.” The AP reported that workers “are reluctant to take extra shifts due to the risk of the novel coronavirus and unruly passengers.”

As with Tonya, Drew said at first he believed the Transport Workers Union Local 556 would defend him from these abuses. He shared an internal email from the TWU’s “Uniform Committee” last month, stating that “some very exciting things [are] in the works,” including a “new women’s blue polo” shirt. “This is a joke,” Drew stated. “It addresses none of our concerns. I’ve heard crickets from them.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact