

Airline industry pushes for return to full capacity as Omicron explosion begins

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Last Wednesday, CEOs representing major commercial airlines testified before the United States Senate Commerce Committee about their efforts to return air travel to full capacity following the historic crisis faced by the industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The airline industry faced a massive business shortage after millions canceled flights in early 2020 as the pandemic first erupted. According to business analysts, the industry suffered a more than 95 percent drop in its business and financial losses totaling nearly \$35 billion.

The airline industry received \$54 billion in federal stimulus money during the pandemic. Part of Congress's record financial support to Wall Street and other corporations organized under the CARES Act was its massive Payroll Support Program, which paid companies to keep their workers on staff.

"It's not an exaggeration to say the [federal bailout] saved the airline industry, which Congress and the administration recognized as critical infrastructure that is as essential to the economy as it is unique," said American Airlines CEO Doug Parker to the committee. Other CEOs, union officials and executives spoke in similarly glowing terms about the financial bailouts their industry received.

With whatever restrictions remaining on social distancing having been lifted, holiday travel is expected to surge this year. AAA predicts that 109 million Americans will travel during this holiday season, 90 percent of the 2019 levels. The *Washington Post* recently noted "the travel industry is coming off a big Thanksgiving bounce... The more than 2.4 million screened the Sunday after Thanksgiving hit the highest daily tally since the pandemic began, according to TSA figures."

This comes in spite of the rapidly expanding winter surge, made immeasurably worse by the Omicron variant. In a public address Tuesday afternoon, President Biden rejected any new lockdowns of businesses and schools and even encouraged Americans not to cancel their Christmas travel plans. This will create the conditions for a massive public health disaster in the coming days and weeks, in which airports will become a major vector of transmission. Indeed, only hours after Biden's speech, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported more than 288,000 new cases, the second highest single day total since the pandemic began.

But the Commerce Committee's main concern was not preventing a public health disaster but ensuring the profitability of the airlines. According to CNBC, the congressional hearing was called to discuss the industry's "hiring trouble, 5G, fuel availability, myriad fees and vaccine mandates though it was called to assess the industry's bailout, its largest."

The industry is facing critical shortages of labor as workers are increasingly resisting unsafe working conditions and overwork. A growing number of airline workers are coming into direct struggle against their employers, demanding better staffing, pay and protections on the job.

In early November, American Airlines reported over 460 flights canceled due to "staffing shortages that led to travel disruptions for tens of thousands of people," according to *CNBC*. The publication noted that shortages "exacerbated routine problems, like bad weather" and disrupted more than 16 percent of its mainline flights.

An Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) representative told the industry publication *Paddle Your Own Kanoo* that worker morale was at the

“lowest ever within recent memory” earlier this month. The official said that “the Omicron variant and other possible future pandemic developments” were creating significant tensions among staff.

Maria Cantwell, Democratic chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, sent a letter to the airline CEOs over the summer complaining that the difficulties with staff shortages “runs counter to the objective and spirit of the [Payroll Support Program], which was to enable airlines to endure the pandemic and keep employees on payroll so that the industry was positioned to capture a rebound in demand.”

This is a critical issue for big-business interests, who are hoping to capitalize on efforts to present the holiday season as safe for travel. United Airlines alone is expecting at least 420,000 customers daily in its terminals during Christmas, up from 400,000 on Thanksgiving, according to news sources.

Nicholas Calio, president of the Airlines for America lobbyist group, noted the economic role played by the airline industry in October. “The full reopening of...travel is...critical to reviving economies around the globe” in time for the holidays, he said.

In their testimony to the Senate Commerce Committee, airline CEOs sought to capitalize even further on the Biden administration’s drive to keep businesses open. Towards this end, Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly even falsely claimed that masks were not necessary on airplanes, in response to a question from Mississippi Republican Roger Wicker, declaring “the case is very strong that masks don’t add much if anything in the air cabin environment...it’s very safe, very high quality compared to any other indoor setting.” American CEO Doug Parker responded to these comments by declaring “I concur.”

The Southwest CEO’s bragging was undermined days later when on Friday it was revealed that he had tested positive for COVID-19. Kelly, who had received three shots, was “experiencing mild symptoms” but was “moving closer to a full recovery,” according to airline spokespeople.

Following this public relations fumble, both Kelly and Parker released statements affirming their support for the Biden administration’s current masking policy, which is slated to end next year.

“We’ve always been told it is safer than being in the general public,” a Southwest flight attendant told the

World Socialist Web Site about Kelly’s claims. “However, it is my understanding that the filters have to be maintained in order to get that quality air.”

Flight attendants from Southwest have written to the WSWS to share stories about their employer’s efforts to gaslight them after forcing them to don chemically toxic company outfits, which in some cases have resulted in workers developing autoimmune disorders that can severely compromise them in the instance of a COVID-19 infection.

The publication *Science Daily* interviewed professors Zhe Peng of the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences and Jose-Luis Jimenez of the University of Colorado Boulder in April regarding the safety of taking masks off indoors. “It’s important to understand that there is no single CO2 level at which a person can assume a shared indoor space is ‘safe’” to unmask, Professor Peng notes.

AFA president Sara Nelson, who was in attendance at the Senate hearing and sat next to the group of CEOs testifying before Congress, said nothing in response to Kelly’s efforts to further endanger the public. Instead, the AFA representative kept her comments focused on praising the CARES Act bailout of the industry.

Sito Pantoja, the International Association of Machinists vice president, gushed to *Forbes* in July about the reopening of the economy. “[Payroll protection] also provided airlines with the capability to gear up as soon as possible. ... All you have to do is take a photo of what airlines looked like a year ago, and what they look like now. All these airports, all these businesses, all these little stores are thriving,” the IAM official gloated. “And everybody knows, however the airlines go, that’s how the economy goes,” he added.



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