

Thousands of flights canceled worldwide due to rising infections among airline workers

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Nearly 3,000 flights were canceled around the world Monday, including nearly 1,000 to, from or within the United States, according to the aviation tracking website FlightAware. The cancellations, as well as nearly 11,000 delays that same day, were largely due to shortages of flight crews and ground support workers caused by the spread of COVID-19 infections.

Globally, airlines canceled more than 6,000 flights on Christmas Eve, Christmas and the day after Christmas. This included at least 2,800 US flights over the weekend as pilots, flight attendants and other airline workers called off sick.

Told by the Biden administration that air travel was safe—despite the explosive spread of the Omicron variant—millions of air travelers piled into packed airports over the holiday weekend. This included a peak of 2.19 million passengers who passed through US airport security checkpoints on December 23 alone.

A flight attendant from Southwest Airlines told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had been forced to work during the holidays after being infected with COVID-19. “I worked on December 21 and the 22, which I believe is when I was exposed because there were several passengers not wearing their masks correctly. All we are supposed to do now is make one announcement [about wearing masks] and that is it,” she said.

“I was feeling symptoms on the night of the 24th. I went to work on the 25th but as the day went on, I got sicker and sicker,” she continued. The flight attendant, who asked that she be identified by a pseudonym “Jodi” to protect her from management retaliation, said that if she hadn’t been traveling with co-workers who assisted her, “I don’t think I would have made it.”

“I did everything I was supposed to do, I got vaccinated, I had the booster, I was vaccinated three

times,” she said. Due to her COVID-19 infection, Jodi has been pulled from the rest of her week’s schedule, meaning that she has effectively lost holiday triple pay for the year.

“I called the [Transport Workers Union] today, they didn’t answer, and I was on hold forever. I will find out tomorrow if I will get my premium pay. For me, that is \$6,000 lost.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Monday announced it was shortening the recommended time infected people should isolate from 10 days to five days if they are asymptomatic. The quarantine period for someone exposed to an infected person was also reduced to five days if they are vaccinated, the CDC said, and people who are fully vaccinated and boosted may not need to quarantine at all.

The CDC made its decision after direct requests from the airlines. As CNBC reported, “Delta CEO Ed Bastian wrote to CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky [on December 21], urging the agency to cut that time in half to just five days, saying the longer quarantine time could hurt the airline’s operations. JetBlue Airways CEO Robin Hayes followed with a similar request to the CDC on Wednesday.”

Airlines for America, a trade group for US air carriers, wrote to Walensky on December 23, requesting that the agency “update” its current 10-day isolation guideline, *Barron’s* reported. “As with healthcare, police, fire and public transportation workforces, the Omicron surge may exacerbate personnel shortages and create significant disruptions to our workforce and operations,” wrote Airlines for America CEO Nicholas Calio.

On NBC Nightly News Monday, reporter Kristen Welker asked Biden’s top COVID-19 advisor Dr.

Anthony Fauci, “What do you say to people who might be concerned that the revised quarantined guidelines are being driven solely by workers shortages and not necessarily in the best interests of public health?” Fauci responded, “No, actually we feel it is safe to do that. If you look at the chance of getting a transmission in that second half of that 10-day period it is considerably less than in those first few days. So, on balance, if you look at the safety of the public and the need to have society not disrupted this was a good choice.”

Walensky echoed the administration’s talking points, saying, “We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science.”

The CDC guideline changes, which follow similar measures for staff in chronically short-staffed hospitals, have nothing to do with public health considerations. On the contrary, they will only increase the danger of mass infections, long-term physical and mental debilitation and death. Saving lives, as opposed to “keeping society functioning”—a euphemism for keeping the economy open producing profits for Wall Street—would require the temporary suspension of non-essential travel, business activity and in-person schooling to cut off the transmission of the virus as a part of a strategy to finally eliminate it and eradicate it.

What the White House is concerned with is keeping profit-making going, regardless of the cost in lives. The CDC action is aimed at shoring up the positions of American, United and other US airlines whose stocks continued to fall Monday in tandem with the number of flights they were forced to cancel.

The labor shortage in the airlines as in other industries has been largely driven by mass retirements encouraged by big business to cut costs and boost profits. Millions of nurses, teachers, transit workers and airline workers and others decided to quit rather than risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones by working in unsafe workplaces.

Since the pandemic began, the US Congress has handed over \$54 billion to the US airlines, more than any other single industry. This included a \$25 billion bailout through the March 2020 CARES Act, \$15 billion in the December 2020 relief bill and another \$14 billion in the 2021 American Rescue Plan. Another \$5 billion was paid to contractors who do food service, janitorial work, maintenance and other work for the

airlines.

While much of the money was paid through the Payroll Support Program (PSP), which was ostensibly designed to prevent layoffs, the airlines nevertheless forced tens of thousands of workers to take “voluntary” buyouts and early retirements. Over 80,000 airline workers were furloughed or lost their jobs, and as of November, airlines have 24,000 fewer workers than they did in 2019.

Far from opposing the attack on workers, the airline unions have blocked any unified struggle to shut the industry down and protect lives. After the CDC decision, Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants and a leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), said it “was less than reassuring” that the CDC’s guideline change “aligns with the number of days pushed by corporate America...”

However, she praised the CDC for adding caveats that “recognize concerns raised by our union,” pointing to the reduction of quarantining to five days “only if asymptomatic and with continued mask wearing for an additional five days.” Knowing this would not impress any airline workers, Nelson went on, “If any business pressures a worker to return to work before they feel better, we will make clear it is an unsafe work environment, which will cause a much greater disruption than any ‘staffing shortages.’”

This is empty bluster. The AFA, the TWU and other airline unions have colluded in the attack on jobs, the piling up of more tasks on workers and the continued life-threatening working conditions in the industry. That is why airline workers should join the growing network of national and international rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-company unions and fight to end the continued sacrifice of workers’ lives and livelihoods to corporate profit.



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