

As flight cancellations mount, airlines pressure COVID infected crews to return to work

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Air travel throughout the United States during the holidays was snarled by flight cancellations caused by the surging Omicron variant among airline workers and inclement weather. More than 3,100 flights to, from and within the United States were canceled on Monday bringing the total to 18,700 since Christmas Eve, according to the tracking web site FlightAware.

Throughout the holidays, airline “crews were increasingly out sick from the fast-spreading Omicron variant of Covid,” CNBC reported. In addition, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials reported there were 1,778 active infections among TSA employees as of Sunday. United, Spirit, Alaska and other airlines offered holiday bonuses to lure workers to man the flights even if they were exhausted or sick, but this failed to stem the tide of cancellations.

In addition to sicknesses caused by the pandemic, flights were snarled due to several large winter storms near key transit hubs in the Midwest and on the East Coast. A New Year’s Day winter storm brought between five and nine inches of snow to the Chicago region, causing the cancellations of over 1,600 flights at O’Hare International and Midway International airports on Saturday and Sunday. A Monday winter storm on the East Coast caused hundreds of cancellations at Reagan National Airport in Washington D.C. and other airports.

Anticipating a sharp spike in absenteeism during the holidays, Delta Airlines, Southwest and other industry officials lobbied the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce its quarantining guidelines for infected or exposed workers. In an act of criminal disregard for public health, the CDC on December 26 changed its guidelines from 10 to five days, giving a

green light to the airlines and other companies to order workers back to work before they fully recovered and/or have stopped being transmissible.

“Delta Air Lines was one of the first companies to adapt to the updated guidance” on December 27, according to *The New York Times*. “Delta is providing five days’ sick leave for infected workers, with two additional paid sick days if they choose to be tested on Day 5 and the results are positive,” the *Times* reported.

The newspaper added, “On Tuesday, in a memo seen by *The New York Times*, JetBlue told employees that it would expect those ‘who have no symptoms, or whose symptoms are improving, to come back to work after five days.’ Crew members may remain on leave if they provide a doctor’s note, but they won’t be paid as if they were working, according to Mr. [Angelo] Cucuzza of the Transport Workers Union.”

Jodi, a Southwest Airlines flight attendant, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to report that she had contracted COVID-19 in the days before the busy holiday rush. “I did everything the company asked. I was triple vaccinated,” she said. “I worked on the 21st and 22nd [of December], when I believe I was exposed,” she said.

Jodi initially believed she was only suffering allergies and tried to work through it. “I have dental work that I need done and a daughter that I am helping to put through college,” she explained. “I really needed the holiday pay.”

Southwest flight attendants haven’t seen any raises since 2014 due to the concessions that Transport Workers Union Local 555 has handed over to the airline. “I’ve minimized my expenses to the point where I live in a mobile home,” she said.

By Christmas Eve, her sickness was too much to bear. But her only option was to call in sick and “get stuck” at a base far from home or try to “work the flights” home. Jodi recounted an exchange she had with a base supervisor. “She asked me, ‘Are you feeling okay? You sound a little sick.’” Rather than relieving Jodi of her shift, the supervisor “offered me a peppermint and told me it would clear my nose while I fly.”

Despite widespread evidence that crowded airports and airplanes would be superspreaders of the more contagious Omicron variant, the Biden administration and its discredited scientific spokesmen encouraged millions to travel over the holiday season. The overriding concern of the White House was to protect the profits of the airlines and other businesses during the holiday shopping season.

CNBC reported Monday that airline stockholders had “shrugged off” the impact of the cancellations, even as they continued to impact travel. The publication reported that airline stocks were up Monday, “a sign investors are looking ahead to the rest of the year, when travel demand is expected to rise.” American Airlines’ shares rose 4.4 percent to \$18.75, United Airlines gained 3.9 percent to close at \$45.49, and Delta added 3.1 percent to end at \$40.29, according to *CNBC*.

The publication quoted Citigroup airline analyst Stephen Trent, who said the Omicron variant represented a “modest, near-term risk,” but that “higher vaccination rates and emerging anti-viral treatments... could make negative, knee-jerk stock price reactions to the emergence of future variants look increasingly unreasonable.”

The airlines, which received \$54 billion in CARES Act and other COVID relief money, forced tens of thousands of airline workers to take early retirements and other buyouts. Although they increased hiring this year, the airline industry employed 413,000 people in October, down almost 9 percent from the same month in 2019, according to federal data.

Driven solely by profit considerations, the airlines and the Biden administration have opposed vaccine mandates for airline passengers. At the same time, airline executives have given succor to more backward elements opposed to even wearing masks. On December 14, Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly testified before the Senate Commerce Committee that

“masks don’t add much if anything in the air cabin environment... it’s very safe.”

Jodi said “maskless passengers” likely infected her. “They don’t want us chasing off passengers,” she said, referring to a company policy which restricts flight attendants’ ability to confront passengers who violate masking rules.

As if the danger of infection, lifelong debilitation, and death from COVID is not enough, flight attendants also face other health and safety threats due to cost-cutting by the airlines. Jodi is party to a lawsuit launched by out-of-work flight attendant Tonya Osborne, who has sued Southwest’s uniform contractor Cintas, which treats its clothing with highly toxic chemical substances known to cause severe health defects.

The Transport Workers Union Local 555 has done nothing to defend Jodi and other workers impacted by COVID-19. “I found out that there is no grievance [that I can file about the loss of pay],” she said. “The union rep said ‘it’s not in the contract, just an incentive’ to get us to work holidays,” she exclaimed, stating that the TWU officer closed the matter.

“We have people working 13 to 16 hour days, which is in violation of the contract, and the TWU just says ‘work it, we’ll grieve it later.’”



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