

Thousands of airline workers out due to COVID-19 infections in the US

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Three thousand workers at United Airlines, over 4 percent of its workforce, have recently tested positive for COVID-19. In recent weeks, the airline has canceled about 8 percent of its flights, or about 29,000 flights. Over the holidays, almost a third of United Airlines workers called in sick at the Newark Liberty International Airport, which is a major United hub.

The whole aviation industry is facing similar issues. Alaska Airlines has also cut about 10 percent of its January flight schedule because of an “unprecedented” number of workers who called in sick due to the Omicron variant surge of COVID-19. The airline was physically incapable of running its operations at full capacity safely with the remaining staff.

Airlines around the world canceled over 6,000 flights on Christmas Eve, Christmas and the day after Christmas. In the United States, over 2,800 flights were canceled during the holiday weekend as pilots, flight attendants and other airlines workers called in sick.

The airlines have had to become more flexible for travelers who might have their travel plans canceled or changed due to the pandemic. The Alaska Air Group Inc. stated, “Right now, we need to build more reliability back into our operation as we deal with the impacts of omicron and during a time when guests generally fly less. [The cancellations] will give us the flexibility and capacity needed to reset while continued flexible travel policies enable guests to adjust their plans accordingly.”

Winter weather also played a factor in airline cancellations, with Alaska cutting 120 flights on January 6, about 16 percent of its total scheduled flights, according to FlightAware.com. The United States saw 1,980 flights canceled for the whole industry on January 6 due to the combined causes of employee illness and severe winter weather. During the holidays, Alaska Airlines canceled almost 15 percent and delayed 38 percent of its scheduled flights between December 24 and

January 5.

Airlines in the United States, including Southwest Airlines, United Airlines and Delta Air Lines, are attempting to get workers back on the job in spite of the risk of infection, using financial incentives to encourage workers to take on extra shifts in order to cover for quarantined workers.

United has recently required its workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19. United Airlines Chief Executive Scott Kirby said that prior to the company’s vaccination requirement, “tragically, more than one United employee on average per week was dying from COVID.” Kirby said that since the vaccination requirement was enacted, “the hospitalization rate among our employees has been 100 times lower than the general population in the U.S.”

In December, Kirby had to defend the airline’s vaccine decision against criticism from the Republican Party. “We did this for safety, we don’t compromise on safety,” Kirby said at the U.S. Senate hearing. Kirby said, “While we have about 3,000 employees who are currently positive for COVID, zero of our vaccinated employees are currently hospitalized.”

Little is being done for airline workers aside from vaccine requirements. Vaccination is an important tool against COVID-19, but vaccines alone cannot prevent the spread of the virus, especially as new variants such as Omicron develop the ability to evade immunity. It is also not a complete guarantee against serious health outcomes from infections such as COVID-19. If safety truly is the primary factor in airline decision making, all but the most necessary flights would be grounded until the pandemic is over and COVID-19 is eliminated from the human population.

Underscoring this lack of focus on safety, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cut the recommended quarantine period from 10 days to five after Delta Airlines

CEO Ed Bastian asked the CDC on December 21 to reduce the quarantine requirements because they might “significantly impact our workforce and operations.” JetBlue Airways CEO Robin Hayes joined in this request the following Wednesday with the support of other airlines. Prior to this, the CDC had already bowed to business interests and arbitrarily shortened the recommended 14 days of isolation to 10.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky openly admitted the economic motivations behind the agency’s decision by saying, “We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science.” “Keeping society functioning” is a euphemism for keeping the economy open and producing profits for Wall Street.

The US airline industry has received \$63 billion in federal stimulus money under the Payroll Support Program (PSP) and other programs since the beginning of the pandemic. In March 2020, \$25 billion came through the CARES Act, \$15 billion through the December 2020 relief bill and \$14 billion through the 2021 American Rescue Plan. An additional \$5 billion was given to food service, maintenance and janitorial contractors. The PSP was part of Congress’s massive financial support to Wall Street and corporations packaged as part of the CARES Act and was officially intended to help corporations keep their workers employed.

In spite of this, airlines forced over 80,000 workers to take “voluntary” buyouts and early retirements. As of November, the airlines have 24,000 fewer workers than they did in 2019. For their part, the airline unions have blocked any attempt to shut down the industry in order to save the lives of their own members.

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) President Captain Joseph G. DePete released a statement on December 14, saying, “Over the past 20 months, the bipartisan Payroll Support Program (PSP) has averted disaster for the airline industry and its workers. Because of the \$63 billion in federal relief as well as aviation workers who volunteered to retire early, our industry was ready for Thanksgiving, with many carriers marking their best on-time performance since 2017.” The only mention of the pandemic in this statement at all was to claim that “thanks to a historic government-labor-airlines partnership, forged during an unprecedented global pandemic, airline pilots are more than ready to safely get passengers to their destinations this holiday season.”

Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA and a leading member of the

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), praised the CDC for recommendations that “recognize concerns raised by our union,” by adding the toothless caveat quarantine can be limited to five days “only if asymptomatic and with continued mask wearing for an additional five days.”

In fact, aviation workers have increasingly been forced to work when they should be in quarantine. Workers whose significant others have tested positive have been ordered to report to work despite the danger of infection. The five-day quarantine period, enacted for business reasons rather than for public health reasons, has made every workplace in the US an unsafe work environment.

A Southwest Airlines flight attendant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was told to report to work during the holidays even after being infected with COVID-19. She said, “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.”

Over the weekend, 157,272 people were in hospitals in the United States, with 25,173 in intensive care units. The daily average in hospital admissions is at 148,782, which is an 80 percent increase from just two weeks ago.

With ALPA, the AFA, the TWU and other airline unions colluding in the attack on workers, airline workers must resort to joining the growing network of independent and international rank-and-file committees in order to protect their lives and livelihoods. The struggle must be taken out of the hands of the pro-corporate unions and placed into the hands of an independent working class working together internationally to prioritize workers’ lives over corporate profit.



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