

Airline workers throughout US oppose overwork, health and safety violations

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Are you an airline worker? If so, contact us to provide more details about your conditions and discuss how to organize a fightback.

Anger among airline workers in the US, like their counterparts around the world, is reaching a boiling point over chronic understaffing, work overload and lack of safety precautions in the face of a new surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Transportation Security Administration, air travel has rebounded to 90 percent of its pre-pandemic levels. This has occurred even while staffing is “about 3,000 employees short of the staffing levels from the same period,” writes Yahoo! News, citing figures from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS).

The number of pilots who reported being unable to work because of fatigue spiked by 330 percent last month, making fatigue the airlines’ “number one safety threat,” the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA) wrote in a letter to management earlier this month. Pilots say airline managers are telling them to handle too many extra flights because of short staffing.

In recent weeks, pilots, flight attendants and other workers at Delta, Spirit and Southwest have picketed in Detroit, Orlando, Las Vegas, Dallas and other cities over unsafe conditions.

“It’s horrible out there,” said a flight attendant at Southwest Airlines to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Southwest keeps adding more and more responsibilities on you, with no additional pay.” If flight attendants try to call off work due to exhaustion, they are met with a “mandatory fact-finding meeting and compliance irregularity reports,” which amount to a threat of disciplinary action. “It’s just not worth it,” she said.

On Tuesday, Spirit Airlines flight attendants held pickets at Detroit Metropolitan Airport after a series of flight cancellations left thousands of crew members and

passengers stranded without room, board or any communication from management. Flight attendants held signs, reading, ‘Think it’s bad flying Spirit? Try working here.’ Other signs denounced rampant overwork and violations of workers’ contracts.

“We get our schedules a month ahead of time,” one flight attendant told the *Detroit News*. “If I’m working for three days, I pack clothing, medication, everything I need for three days. If it becomes six, that affects our lives, our health, our families,” she said.

Spirit Airlines has experienced several massive “operational meltdowns” since flights picked up in late summer 2021. In a colossal organizational failure, the airline cancelled 61 percent of its flights last August over a three-day period, without a word from management.

A worker told the *Detroit News* that fellow crew members and she were left for nearly a week in Fort Lauderdale, Florida during the affair. “Despite messages sent to management, the group didn’t hear anything for five days, resulting in ‘no-shows’ for subsequent assigned flights out of cities they weren’t in,” the publication wrote.

The airline, which is based in the Miami metropolitan area and has roughly 40 percent of its air travel centered in the region, was forced to cancel 30 percent of its flights earlier this month.

The company has since announced that it was scaling back its scheduled flights “by 5% to 6% in June after making smaller adjustments in April and May,” reports the *Wall Street Journal*. These moves have been duplicated at other airlines, with Jetblue announcing a 10 percent reduction in flights for the time being as well.

The company plans to ramp up its schedule in anticipation of the busy summer months. “Our biggest concern is that all of this has happened ahead of our summer schedule, which will be the biggest flying schedule that Spirit has ever put out,” stated an

Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) official to the industry publication *Simply Flying*.

Airport workers are also coming into struggle, particularly over the impact of inflation on their already poverty-level wages. On March 30, airport contract workers in 20 different US cities staged protests denouncing poverty-level pay. According to Tampa-based WMNF, some contract workers are classified as tipped labor and only receive a base pay of \$6.98 an hour.

Frank, a wheelchair assistant, told the radio station that while qualifying as a tip worker, he was “strictly prohibited” from asking for tips. “Without any way to make that direct ask, tips are unreliable at best,” he said.

These struggles are part a series of battles by airline workers across the globe. Air New Zealand flight crews on Boeing 787 and 777 wide-body jets are defying management reprisals and striking to demand improved wages for workers making little more than the minimum wage. In Germany, workers at Frankfurt Airport have waged a months-long fight against the firing of 230 ground workers by the service company WISAG.

The COVID-19 pandemic initially hit the airline industry very hard, with a 95 percent fall in air travel and \$35 billion in losses. Both corporate-backed parties responded by handing the airlines nearly \$54 billion in federal stimulus money, based on the claims that airlines would protect the jobs of their employees. Instead, they carried out mass layoffs and then subjected their employees to brutal conditions once flights resumed.

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) and other unions campaigned on behalf of industry for government bailout money. At the same time, the unions blocked any struggle by airline workers to fight layoffs, pay cuts and abusive conditions, which drove even more workers out of the industry.

The airline industry has been at the forefront of efforts to enforce the unsafe resumption of business since the Omicron surge of the pandemic. In October, Nicholas Calio of the Airlines for America lobbying group claimed that the full reopening of travel was “critical to reviving economies around the globe.”

The airline lobby was also instrumental in getting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to cut COVID-19 quarantine time in half last December from 10 days to only 5. The Associated Press reported at the time that this measure was necessary because “the sheer number of people becoming infected—and therefore having to isolate or quarantine—threatens to crush the

ability of hospitals, airlines and other businesses to stay open, experts say.”

On Tuesday, a federal judge in Florida, a Trump appointee, handed another gift to the airlines, allowing them to end masking requirements on all flights. Several airlines immediately ended mandatory masking on their flights.

AFA President Sara Nelson, a leader of the Democratic Socialists of America, made it clear the union would not carry out any struggle against this deadly measure and instead urged workers to look to the Biden administration to protect them and the flying public. “We will soon have more legal analysis on what this means and what next steps may be taken in court by the government,” Nelson said in a statement.

On Wednesday, the Justice Department announced it would appeal the judge’s ruling. The appeal process, which could take months, has no practical impact on the lifting of mask mandate. The Biden administration could have but did not demand a stay of enforcement of the judge’s order until the appeal process ran out.

In fact, the Biden administration welcomes the lifting of the mask mandate and has insisted that workers “live with the virus.” From the beginning both big business parties have sacrificed the lives of workers to corporate America.

Airline workers are entering major battles in the US and around the world. To prepare for this fight, airline workers need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist trade unions, to prepare an industry-wide struggle and link with airline workers around the world to end exhausting schedules, demand the hiring of new workers and win substantial improvements in wages and working conditions.

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