

# Southwest Airlines reaches tentative agreement for customer service workers

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A contract vote is continuing at Southwest Airlines on a tentative agreement (TA) negotiated by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) union for the company's 7,000 customer service workers.

The four-year TA announced last March includes a 6.5 percent increase in pay on the date of ratification, and a 3 percent increase for each of the next three years of the agreement, far below the rate of inflation. The TA also includes a \$1,000 to \$3,000 company bonus as well as a \$400 Productivity Bonus using sick leave data. The TA also puts a monthly cap of 32 hours for mandatory overtime.

Adam Carlisle, the Vice President of Labor Relations at Southwest Airlines, claimed, "This agreement rewards our hardworking Customer Service Employees, who have certainly demonstrated their dedication to Southwest as they have continued to assist our Customers throughout the pandemic. We appreciate the dedication and fortitude demonstrated by both Negotiating Committees as we worked to reach this agreement."

The proposed contract with the IAM at Southwest Airlines comes during a time of expanding class struggle in the airlines and other industries. On Thursday, April 21, 100 off-duty Delta Air Lines pilots silently picketed at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport as part of a multi-airport protest in the US. "They have the planes, but not enough pilots, so they're over scheduling the airline relying on these pilots to pick up that overtime. If our pilots didn't pick up this overtime, there would probably be cancellations," Delta Air Lines captain Jason Ambrosi told FOX 9 news in Bloomington, MN. The company blames this problem of over scheduling on a shortage of pilots caused by aging flight crews, with many

eligible pilots taking early retirements during the pandemic to protect their lives.

Pilots for Alaska Airlines will soon receive ballots for a strike authorization vote on May 9 due to stalled negotiations having gone to federal mediation. The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) union had been negotiating a new contract with Alaska Airlines since 2019, with a pause in negotiations at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike authorization vote is mostly theater, since the National Mediation Board doesn't allow "legal" strikes from airline and railroad workers unless negotiations have completely broken down and a long mediation process is exhausted. The overwhelming majority (99 percent) of industry mediations brought to the board since 1980 have prevented strike action by forcing a settlement between the unions and management.

Such settlements are welcome to the trade union bureaucrats, who go to great lengths to avoid calling strikes. Will McQuillen, chairman of the Alaska Airlines Master Executive Council (MEC), a branch of ALPA, stressed that the union sought a management-friendly agreement that they could sell to members. "Alaska pilots are not looking to strike. We are looking for improvements to our contract in line with the market but that will also allow our company to grow and remain successful and competitive. However, we are willing to take any lawful steps necessary, including a legal strike."

Stock phrases such as "in line with the market" show the willingness of unions to suppress labor costs to "allow [their companies] to grow and remain successful and competitive." McQuillen's reference to "lawful steps" indicates his complete subordination of the interests of workers to the corporatist contract mediation process aimed at indefinitely delaying strike

action.

The IAM acknowledges that their members at Southwest Airlines were forced to continue to work in less safe conditions throughout the pandemic and congratulates themselves on a TA that offers a 6.5 percent increase in pay the first year during a time when 8.5 percent inflation makes that increase effectively a pay cut. The following three years of annual 3 percent increases is a further insult to workers, who will continue to see their living conditions eroded by soaring prices.

The health of airline workers is being further compromised as airlines drop COVID-19 mitigations like masking requirements after US District Judge Kathryn Mizelle struck down the federal mask mandate for public transportation, including airline travel.

Meanwhile, overseas airlines like Swiss-operated EasyJet have had to cancel hundreds of flights as the Omicron BA.2 subvariant of COVID-19 rips through a working population as the ruling class abandons even the pretense of trying to contain the virus.

The dropping of all mitigations comes only three months after US airlines had to cut 8-10 percent of their flights, about 29,000 flights, due to the COVID-19 Omicron variant surge causing an “unprecedented” number of workers to call in sick. Over the Christmas holidays, almost a third of United Airlines workers called in sick at the Newark Liberty International Airport.

Meanwhile, ALPA, the IAM, and the other trade unions are colluding with the airlines in the dismantling of all COVID safety protects while attempting to impose grossly inadequate wage increases. This raises the necessity for airline workers to take independent action outside the framework of the pro-company unions by joining and building the network of rank-and-file committees to protect their lives and livelihoods. Workers must insist that the protection of decent and safe working conditions and living wages take precedence over airline profits.



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