

Alaska pilots overwhelmingly vote to authorize strike

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Alaska Airlines pilots voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) union reported on Wednesday. ALPA, which covers more than 3,000 pilots at Alaska Air Group Inc., said 99 percent of ballots cast supported strike action.

The strike vote demonstrates the expanding opposition across the airline industry, where pilots are demanding higher pay and relief from “fatiguing” schedules. US based carriers let go thousands of pilots in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and are now facing staffing shortages and pilot overwork as airlines attempt to return to pre-pandemic operations. However, the fact that the pandemic is still ongoing is leading to infections among remaining overworked crews, further exacerbating staffing shortages.

The Alaska pilots strike is the latest indication of a renewed class struggle in the United States on a scale not seen in decades, driven by intolerable working conditions and runaway inflation. It follows near unanimous strike authorization votes by 56,000 public workers in Los Angeles County, auto parts workers at Detroit Diesel, aluminum workers at Arconic and others. An open strike by 1,1000 agricultural equipment workers at CNH is currently ongoing in the Midwest, and thousands of nurses in Minnesota and California have taken part in limited strike action.

Staffing issues have forced Alaska Airlines to cancel 4 percent of its scheduled flights in May. Delta Air Lines released a statement on Thursday saying it will cut approximately 100 flights per day this summer in order to “minimize disruptions and bounce back faster when challenges occur.” JetBlue will cut 8 to 10

percent of its summer flights because of “continued industry challenges.”

Rather than suffer under these onerous and risky conditions, many pilots have chosen to resign or seek employment at other carriers. Alaska Airlines reported 27 of its pilots resigned before their retirement dates in the first quarter of 2022. ALPA states that Alaska Airlines will lose 180 pilots to other airlines by the end of the year, as Alaska’s contract with their pilots is below the rest of the industry.

Alaska Airlines and the union have been in talks over a new contract for nearly three years, with pay, job security and fatigue mitigation scheduling as major points of contention. ALPA said that Alaska Airlines has not “meaningfully” addressed these issues.

The vote to authorize strike action does not mean that ALPA will call a strike. Since the 1930s, the airline industry has been under the jurisdiction of the notorious Railway Labor Act (RLA), which Congress passed a decade earlier with the intent of all but eliminating strikes in the transportation industry.

The provisions of this law were used by a federal judge earlier this year to issue an injunction against strike action by 17,000 engineers and conductors at BNSF railway against a punitive new attendance policy imposed unilaterally by management. During the hearings, company lawyers gloated that the courts have sided with the railroads virtually ever time in the last four decades, and the judge justified his anti-democratic decision by reference to the supposed need to preserve the integrity of American supply chains. Ironically, the exploitative new attendance policy has led to thousands of resignations, bringing the railroad’s operations to the brink of collapse.

For the courts to sign off on a strike under the RLA, the National Mediation Board would have to find that

the company and the union are at a stalemate and further bargaining would not accomplish any more. The board would then have to give ALPA permission to strike, an act that is so rare that it has not happened since Spirit Airlines pilots went on strike in 2010. The Railway Labor Act, which also covers airline negotiations, would allow President Biden to intervene and halt a pilot strike, creating a final obstacle for Alaska pilots.

In fact, neither ALPA nor Alaska Airlines want pilots to strike, which would not only interrupt the flow of corporate profits but encourage workers across the industry. The union bureaucrats rely on their cozy relationship with airline management for their own perks and positions.

ALPA has time and again isolated and betrayed struggles by pilots. After being forced by militant rank-and-file pilots to go on strike in 2010, ALPA was happy to allow other airlines to scab by honoring Spirit tickets during the strike. Sean Creed, the chairman of the ALPA unit at Spirit Airlines, said the union had no problem with this scabbing which directly undercut the effectiveness of the pilots' strike action.

The pattern of trade union betrayal goes back further back to the 2005 mechanics strike at Northwest Airlines when ALPA, along with fellow AFL-CIO member union the International Association of Machinists (IAM), decided to cross picket lines. IAM workers were told by the company to perform tasks normally done by the striking AMFA workers, eliciting no protest from the union. The Professional Flight Attendants Association also continued to work during the strike.

Alaska pilots must be prepared to take the initiative into their own hands to prevent similar sabotage of their struggle. The WSWS encourages them to form an independent rank-and-file committee, consisting of pilots themselves in alliance with flight attendants, ground crew, terminal workers and others to fight for better working conditions and wages.



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