

Pilots protest across the US as flight cancellations mount ahead of Fourth of July weekend

Jerry White, Nick Barrickman
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Thousands of Delta Airlines pilots are picketing at airports across the country today to protest exhausting work schedules and years of eroding pay and benefits. The protests take place just before the busy Fourth of July weekend, when 3.5 million Americans have booked flights, and amid another spike in cancellations, delays, misplaced baggage and other chaos at the airports.

Airlines have sought to ramp up to full capacity for the summer travel season even though they face a chronic shortage of pilots, flight attendants, baggage handlers and other workers. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has also admitted that it is understaffed, particularly at a key air traffic control center in Florida.

On top of the tens of thousands of forced buyouts and retirements the airlines carried out when the pandemic first hit, the shortages are being fueled by a large increase in COVID-related absenteeism, particularly after airlines lifted mask mandates in late April.

On Wednesday, the official daily average of COVID cases—which is a far undercount of the real figures—reached 108,963, with 32,148 hospitalizations and 377 deaths. Fatalities have been up 17 percent over the last two weeks.

Earlier this week, *Forbes* wrote, “In effect, airlines face both indirect and direct staffing shortages from COVID. Indirectly, a hangover from the lockdown periods has left staffing thin. More directly—and an issue few are talking about—COVID is making many workers sick so they can’t show up for work.” The magazine also noted, “just two weeks after the end of mask mandates, the number of TSA (federal Transportation Security Administration) employees contracting COVID increased by 50%.”

In addition, large numbers of pilots are taking time off due to fatigue, rather than risk the safety of their passengers and flight crews.

“They are working us to death,” James, a Southwest Airlines flight attendant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There will always be delays and waits. Customer service, ground crews, everyone is overworked like you wouldn’t believe.”

Due to these intolerable conditions and poor pay, James said, there was a high turnover rate for new workers. “There are new people who witness how us more senior employees get treated. Once they see it, they’re gone,” he said.

James described a recent situation when a pilot asked for leave due to fatigue. “We were all lobbied at 5 a.m., ready to get on the plane, when the captain had to re-route us,” he said. “He had just worked a 12-14-hour shift and was still fatigued.” While safety regulation requires such a pilot to be pulled from the flight to get an additional four hours of rest, he said, the flight attendants were left on-call. “There were three of us. We were left without food, no hotel room, being paid \$2 an hour per diem.”

When flight attendants are “mando’ed,” James said, referring to mandatory overtime, they are paid less than the minimum wage no matter how long the delay. Under the terms of the union contract, he explained flight attendants will only get paid the typical \$135 a trip if they are on the plane with “doors closed.”

“The customers were all compensated for the delay, we didn’t even get a room,” he said, adding, “I have to work three jobs to make ends meet.”

With the global airline industry facing a breakdown, airlines have begun to cut back on flights. As of early Wednesday, more than 520 US flights had been canceled and nearly 1,300 more were delayed, according to airline tracker FlightAware, with American Airlines and United Airlines flights most affected. More than half of all flights in and out of Toronto Pearson, Montreal Trudeau

International and Canada's other major airports are being cancelled or delayed, according to DataWazo.

In 2020, the Democrats and Republicans handed the airlines billions in COVID relief funds, allegedly to prevent permanent layoffs when air travel plummeted during the onset of the pandemic. Instead, Delta, United and other airlines forced tens of thousands of workers to take buyouts and early retirements to trim their payrolls. Although air traffic has returned to near pre-pandemic levels, the airlines have not hired back tens of thousands of workers. Instead, they are pushing their current workforces to the brink.

As for the pilot, flight attendant and other airline unions, they joined the airline bosses in lobbying Congress for the bailout money and then acceded to the companies' demands for job cuts and wage and benefit concessions.

With the airlines beating profit forecasts and raising their revenue outlooks, workers, who have borne all the health risks and sacrifices of the pandemic, are demanding substantial improvements in wages, working conditions, and health care and pension benefits.

Non-scheduled Delta pilots are picketing today at airports in Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Seattle and Salt Lake City. Delta's 13,900 pilots, who are members of the Air Lines Pilots Association (ALPA), have been working under pay rates and work rules last negotiated in 2016. ALPA agreed to an extension of the contract during the first two years of the pandemic and pilots have suffered a pay freeze over the last three-and-a-half years.

"Delta pilots were front-line leaders during COVID and the recovery," stated Captain Jason Ambrosi, Chairman of ALPA's Delta Master Executive Council (MEC). "We helped our airline recover by flying record amounts of overtime and spending more time away from our families than ever before to get our customers safely to their destinations. It's time for management to recognize our contributions."

Ambrosi continued, "We're now going into the Independence Day Holiday weekend and are concerned that our customers' plans will be disrupted once again. The perfect storm is occurring. Demand is back and pilots are flying record amounts of overtime but are still seeing our customers being stranded and their holiday plans ruined. Unfortunately, these problems have not led to any greater urgency from management to resolve our issues at the negotiating table."

On Tuesday, 500 FedEx cargo plane pilots held an informational picket outside the FedEx Air Operations

Center in Memphis, Tennessee to demand a new contract. ALPA has been negotiating for a new contract since May 2021. "Throughout the pandemic, while many were shutting down and working virtually, FedEx pilots were flying across the globe keeping the world economy intact. We have earned an industry-leading contract through these remarkable efforts and now is the time for FedEx to deliver," said Capt. Chris Norman, chair of the FedEx ALPA Master Executive Council.

Last week, ALPA signed agreed to a new two-year contract covering 14,000 pilots at United Airlines. The deal, which pilots will vote on through July 15, provides three pay raises totaling 14.5 percent, retroactive to January 2022 and ending in January 2024. The union says it also contains better overtime and premium pay, pension improvements, better scheduling provisions and a new eight-week paid maternity leave benefit.

With the annual inflation rate currently at 8.6 percent, the two-year increase amounts to an actual cut in real wages. In Phoenix, one of United's major hubs, inflation is running at over 10 percent.

Nevertheless, the *Wall Street Journal* denounced the deal in an editorial board statement, titled, "United Airlines' inflation warning." The mouthpiece for corporate America complained, "Workers throughout the economy are demanding bigger raises to compensate for soaring prices," and warned of the danger of a 1970s style "wage-price spiral."

The growing resistance of US airline workers is part of a global struggle, with Ryanair cabin crews striking over pay and working conditions last week in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Italy; and strikes by Air France pilots and air traffic controllers at the Marseille Area Control Center this week.

To fight the global airline companies, workers need to reject the nationalism of the airline unions and build rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles across national borders. To fight for this, we urge airline workers to join and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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