

United, Southwest flight attendants picket in US as airline workers reach breaking point

WSWS reporting teams
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United and Southwest airlines flight attendants picketed at airports in the US and other locations Tuesday to protest exhausting schedules, the lack of accommodation for stranded flight crews and the refusal of the carriers to increase pay in the face of surging inflation.

The protests at more than a dozen airports in the US, Guam and London occurred as anger among rank-and-file airline workers reaches a breaking point over the intolerable conditions caused by the resumption of pre-pandemic flight levels with thousands of fewer workers.

Picketers carried signs, reading, “Solutions, not excuses,” “Flight attendants lead the way,” “Making it work is exhausting. Fix it,” and “Can you hear us now?” Pilots, ticket agents, baggage handlers, airport service workers and passengers expressed their support for the protesting flight attendants. A baggage handler at the airport at the Harry Reid airport in Las Vegas, Nevada told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he understood why flight attendants were protesting because all the airlines are short-staffed.

On Monday, 1,000 cooks, bartenders, lounge workers and other workers employed by scores of food outlets and contractors walked out on strike at San Francisco International Airport. The workers, who are members of Unite Here Local 2, make \$16-17 an hour, and many are forced to work two or three jobs to feed their families. “We sell \$21 margaritas and we’re getting paid \$16 an hour,” said one worker in a TikTok video released by the union. In addition to higher wages, workers are demanding increased staffing and are opposing employers’ demands that they pay higher out-of-pocket health care costs.

When air travel plummeted when the pandemic first hit, the unions joined airline executives in lobbying

Congress to bail out the airlines based on bogus promises that airline workers would not be permanently laid off. After taking a \$46 billion bailout, United, American, Southwest and other airlines promptly cut 100,000 jobs through furloughs, buyouts and forced retirements. Over the last two years, the carriers have ramped up flights with nearly 20,000 fewer workers than in February 2020. This has led to exhausting and dangerous conditions for workers and tens of thousands of flight cancellations and delays for passengers, particularly during peak travel periods.

There is widespread sentiment for collective strike action by all airline workers, but the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) at United and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) at Southwest limited flight attendants to informational picketing. At the same time, they restricted flight attendants from making any public statements and instructed them to direct all media inquiries to union spokespersons.

The airline carriers have dragged out negotiations for years, essentially freezing wages of pilots, flight attendants and other airline workers even as their paychecks are eaten up by 8-9 percent inflation.

The airline executives are in no hurry to come to a deal since they know the unions will not challenge the anti-democratic provisions of the Railway Labor Act (RLA), which essentially strips workers of the right to strike and ties them up in a virtually endless process of government mediation, which can culminate in the US Congress imposing a pro-company deal on them. The rail unions are presently collaborating with Biden to impose such a deal but are facing a rebellion by workers who have formed rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

Under the RLA, contracts do not expire, they only become “amendable,” union officials say. It has been a

year, however, since new terms could be negotiated. Workers have been kept in the dark about what wage and other demands, if any, that AFA, TWU and other unions have made to management. Far from organizing a fight against the intransigence of the companies, the unions are obediently abiding by the reactionary terms of the RLA and are instead calling for federal mediation to reach a deal.

This further exposes AFA-CWA President Sara Nelson, a leader of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who is touted by various middle class “left” organizations as a new, militant labor leader, along with such figures as Teamsters President Sean O’Brien who is currently selling out the railroad workers.

Nelson’s chief negotiator is Joe Burns, the author of the recent book *Class Struggle Unionism*. In it, he declares, “Our key task is to develop a labor movement based on militancy and violating labor law.” But this is only rhetoric aimed at duping workers. In the end, Nelson, Burns & Co. bow before the RLA and are opposed to any struggle against the Biden administration, the Democratic Party and the capitalist system they defend.

This underscores the need for airline workers to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees built by railroad workers, teachers, nurses, autoworkers and others to fight for the demands workers need, not what the corporations and the union bureaucrats say is affordable. A critical component of this fight is linking up airline workers in the US with their class brothers and sisters throughout the global airline industry.

On Tuesday, strikes by Aerolíneas Argentinas workers over wages and conditions cancelled of dozens of flights at airports in the capital of Buenos Aires. In Italy, cabin crew from budget airlines Ryanair and Vueling are set to strike across the country on October 1 to demand higher pay, better working conditions and the restoration of the jobs of 17 Vueling flight attendants based in Rome.

In mid-September, a strike by French air traffic controllers over the lack of a pay increase and understaffing caused hundreds of cancellations. Controllers were set to begin a three-day strike Wednesday, but the unions reached a deal with civil aviation authorities.



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