

Delta Airline pilots vote near-unanimously for strike action amid growing struggle of transport workers

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On Monday, 15,000 Delta Airline pilots voted to go on strike by more than 99 percent, after contract talks have dragged on for three years between management and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA).

Delta pilots have been working under the strictures of their 2016 contract. The contract became open for negotiations in 2019 before being put on hold during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Negotiations resumed under the direction of a federal mediator.

“Today, Delta’s nearly 15,000 pilots sent a clear message to management that we are willing to go the distance to secure a contract that reflects the value we bring to Delta Air Lines as frontline leaders and long-term stakeholders,” said Capt. Jason Ambrosi of ALPA in a public statement.

Delta’s stocks dropped on Monday and Tuesday after the strike vote results were announced, with Market Watch noting the airline’s stocks were “\$12.64 below its 52-week high (\$46.27), which the company achieved on April 21st.”

Airline cabin crews work under the same anti-labor Railway Labor Act (RLA) that over 120,000 railroad workers worker under. Under the stipulations of the 1926 RLA, these workers’ contracts do not expire, they merely become “amenable,” allowing employers to keep them on the job while negotiations wind their way through federal mediations.

They are also subject to severe restrictions on their right to strike or other forms of “self-help.” However, those terms finally expired for railroaders on September 16, with the ending of a final 30-day “cooling-off” period.

Following the vote, ALPA said: “Before a strike can

take place, the National Mediation Board must first decide that additional mediation efforts would not be productive and offer the parties an opportunity to arbitrate the contract dispute. If either side declines the arbitration, both parties enter a 30-day ‘cooling off’ period, after which pilots and management can engage in self-help—a strike by the union or a lockout by management.”

Airline workers have been forced to bear the brunt of the airlines’ subordination of health and safety to the drive for profit. In 2020, airlines and the official trade unions lobbied for a massive \$54 billion federal bailout as part of the CARES Act.

This was justified at the time on the grounds that this money would be used to prevent mass layoffs and pay the salaries of furloughed workers. But three years into the pandemic, tens of thousands of workers been made to leave the industry, with nobody hired to replace them. “Staff shortages were a long-running problem before the pandemic but the pandemic made it much worse as airlines were forced to furlough or let go of workers in their thousands,” *Business Insider* reported in July.

The publication cited an Oxford Economics study which “estimates that globally, there were 2.3 million fewer people working in aviation by September 2021 compared with the beginning of the pandemic.” The CEO of Malaysian Airlines warned last June that adequate staffing levels are not expected until next year.

The massive dislocations and travel meltdowns which occurred over the summer left hundreds of thousands stranded or separated from their luggage. This was caused by airlines’ efforts to maximize their summer

profits without having the necessary staff.

The strike vote by 15,000 Delta pilots raises the possibility of a concerted struggle among all sectors of transport workers, from rail to airline, right at the onset of the busy holiday season.

United Airline pilots on Tuesday “overwhelmingly” rejected a tentative agreement, which would have locked them into a 15 percent pay increase over a year and a half. According to ALPA, United has taken a “wait-and-see approach to negotiations,” offering the lowest possible pay raises at the outset. United pilots plan to conduct a series of informational pickets in the coming weeks.

This week, representatives from American Airlines and the American Pilots Association will meet to consider a tentative agreement struck between negotiators last month before taking the offer to its members.

United and Southwest Airlines flight attendants held nationwide pickets in September in opposition to the lack of pay raises and employee burnout. “It’s time for Southwest to pony up,” said Ryan, an air flight attendant at the company, to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Southwest flight attendants are currently involved in government mediations.

When asked about the impact of a strike at Delta, Ryan declared “it would be perfect. Maybe SWA would get their sh-t together and get these contracts done to avoid that happening here.” In addition to contract disputes, Southwest and Delta employees also both have faced their managements’ efforts to jeopardize their health through forcing flight attendants to don toxic uniforms, resulting in severe health complications.

The struggle in the airlines combines with a rapidly escalating movement for a strike of railway workers. Rail workers in three unions have already voted to reject a pro-company contract proposal pushed on them by the White House and various trade unions, raising the possibility of a national strike. On Monday, nearly 60,000 railway conductors and engineers began voting on the deal, a vote which will determine the fate of the Biden-sponsored contract.

ALPA and Delta have sought to downplay the threat of a strike taking place. “Our goal is to reach an agreement, not to strike. The ball is in management’s court. It’s time for the company to get serious at the

bargaining table and invest in the Delta pilots,” stated Ambrosi of ALPA.

The pilots association’s cautious approach has encouraged the airline to double down. In a statement, Delta declared with confidence that “this authorization vote will not affect our operation for our customers” and that “There are many steps remaining in the process and many opportunities left for collaborative negotiations before a strike is even allowed to be considered.”

As with the rail workers, who have faced the joint efforts of the government, corporations and unions to impose the will of management, airline workers should take these statements to mean that a similar conspiracy against their interests is being prepared. Rather than wait to face this sellout on their own, they should seek to unify their struggles with their fellow transport workers on the ground and jointly build momentum to carry their struggle forward.

Rail workers have done this through forming the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has organized opposition to both the contract and the betrayals by the union bureaucracy.



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