Momentum among airline workers continues to build as American Airlines pilots reject new tentative agreement

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The Allied Pilots Association (APA) said on Wednesday that its board of directors rejected a tentative agreement (TA) for a new contract with American Airlines by a vote of 15-5.

The proposal would have increased pilot pay by 12 percent on the date of contract signing with a 5 percent raise the next year and a 2 percent raise the year after. However, after pilots have been working for three years under the old contract with no wage increases during the coronavirus pandemic, and with annual inflation topping 8 percent, this 19 percent raise is insultingly low.

"We cannot vote to approve a [tentative agreement] that does not adequately address the quality-of-life items of our airline pilots," APA officials at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport said in a letter to pilots. "The Company has returned a proposal that is not only subpar in these areas, but it also demonstrates a complete lack of understanding how important these issues are for you."

There are growing signs that a significant movement is underway among airline workers and pilots, in particular. The APA, which covers approximately 15,000 American Airlines pilots, rejected the TA only one day after United Airlines pilots voted down a TA by 94 percent, and two days after 15,000 Delta Air Lines pilots voted to go on strike by 99 percent. Earlier this year, pilots at Alaska Airlines also voted to authorize a strike, although they voted to accept a new three-year contract earlier this month.

Earlier this year, pilots and flight attendants held informational pickets at airports across the country. Internationally, strikes by air crews have also taken place at Eurowings in Germany and Ryanair in Spain.

The main issue for AA pilots is overwork and unpredictable working schedules. These have worsened over the course of the pandemic, which has compounded a pilots shortage that has been building for years. Over the summer, American saw the number of pilot fatigue call-ins increase to quadruple the normal rate, APA spokesman Dennis Tajer told AINonline.

With travel demand once again surging as COVID-related restrictions have been dismantled, the airlines are returning to profitability for the first time in years. However, they have received tens of billions of dollars in federal bailout money, ostensibly intended to provide pay for furloughed workers and prevent layoffs. Nevertheless, the airlines ended up laying off thousands of workers, contributing to pilot shortage, especially at regional airlines.

An Oxford Economics study stated that there were 2.3 million fewer aviation workers globally in September 2021 compared with pre-pandemic numbers. Staff shortages were already a chronic problem before the pandemic but were exacerbated by tens of thousands of workers leaving the industry and not being replaced.

Workers are also pressing for their demands in other critical transportation industries. On the major US railroads, 120,000 workers are pressing for strike action and the rejection of sellout contracts reached with the involvement of the White House. As with pilots, erratic scheduling and overwork is the number one issue for rail crews, who are on call 24/7 and have no guaranteed sick days. Workers in three out of the 12 rail unions have already rejected their tentative agreements.

Both the railroad and airline industries are under the

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jurisdiction of the notorious Railway Labor Act, which severely limits the right to strike and prohibits contracts from expiring.

On the West Coast docks, 22,000 port workers have been working without a contract for three months since the expiration of their contract on July 1. The 800 members of the East Coast International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) were also set to go on strike at the Port of Mobile, Alabama, in October after members of Local 1410 rejected three consecutive TAs.

A confrontation is brewing not only with the airlines but governments which have shielded the airlines financially while rubber-stamping job losses. The union bureaucracy, much as it is doing in the rail industry, is working to prevent a strike and dutifully enforce the terms of the RLA. Railroad workers are organizing against the sabotage of their struggle by the union officialdom by forming the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

After this week's strike vote at Delta, the ALPA sought to downplay the threat of a strike: "Our goal is to reach an agreement, not to strike. The ball is in management's court," the union said. This only emboldened Delta, which 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."

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