

Fatigue emerges as key issue as US airline pilots reject contracts, authorize strike action

Claude Delphian
7 November 2022

A 72-hour span last week saw a series of votes by airline pilots which set the stage for a showdown with the US airlines. On Monday, 15,000 Delta Airlines pilots voted by 99 percent to authorize strike action. On Tuesday, pilots at United Airlines voted to reject a tentative agreement by 94 percent. On Wednesday, officials in the Allied Pilots Association (APA) at American Airlines voted down a new deal by a vote of 15–5.

These votes were a powerful sign of the determination of pilots and air crews to fight against worsening conditions. Pilots and flight attendants also held informational pickets at airports across the United States earlier this year. Around the world, flight crews went on strike recently at Eurowings in Germany and Ryanair in Spain.

One of the main factors driving pilots' opposition is the issue of fatigue. During the month of June, there were quadruple the usual number of fatigue-related pilot call-ins at American Airlines. Pilots are directly responsible for the safety of flights and are obligated to report to work fit for duty, which means using their own sick leave if they feel they cannot perform their duties up to standard on a particular day.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requires a minimum rest period of nine hours between shifts for pilots, who are also limited to 30 hours of flight time per week. But when the commute to work, meals and other life requirements are added into the equation, this leaves little time for uninterrupted sleep and sabotages workers' abilities to follow their FAA-mandated training to avoid fatigue on their own time.

For pilots, the duty period can range between 12 and 14 hours, with most flight times during that period lasting eight or nine hours. The FAA says that it strictly enforces these regulations in order to “ensure continued safety,” but adhering continuously to the bare minimum for rest periods is still wearing on aviation workers' abilities to work safely.

Dennis Trajer, the communications chair at the Allied Pilots Association (APA) union at American Airlines, says that pilots across the industry are far more fatigued than previously because they are being “recklessly utilized” by airlines looking to capitalize on increased travel demand after remaining COVID-19 restrictions were lifted by governments around the world.

told Fox Business that airlines are scheduling more flights than they have trained and current flight crews, which increases fatigue, sick calls, and therefore delayed flights or outright cancellations. On some days in June, there were ten times the usual number of sick calls, which Trajer states is a “warning sign that the system is under unnecessary duress.”

“This reckless utilization decreases reliability and can narrow the margin of safety,” Trajer said. “We are holding the line on the margin of safety, but a functional safety culture should not have such pressures.”

According to collected reports made to the Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP), the number of fatigue reports “have been climbing exponentially” since the summer of 2021 when airline travel returned to normal and there have been “no meaningful attempts by management to mitigate them.”

“Our contention is that our schedules shouldn't drive such a large increase in fatigue calls, nor should our pilots be the absolute last line of defense in the fatigue error chain,” said Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA) President Casey Murray. “Safety shouldn't fall upon an already overworked pilot to recognize the level of his/her fatigue.”

In a letter to Southwest Airlines management in April, SWAPA said that the rates of tired pilots spiked by 600 percent in October 2021 and rose again by 330 percent in March 2022. “April is already setting fatigue records. Fatigue, both acute and cumulative, has become Southwest Airlines' number-one safety threat.” Pilot fatigue causes “impaired judgment, lack of concentration, reduced in-flight attention, and heightened emotional activity leading to poor cognitive processing, along with decreased reaction time and slower hand-eye coordination, to name a few,” warned the letter.

Scheduling issues such as reassignments are contributing to pilots' exhaustion. “Our Pilots have been unable to obtain hotel rooms for proper rest following excessive reassignments and the resultant delays.” There were more than 100 documented cases over the past year that pilots “were not provided with the federally mandated minimum rest opportunity.”

According to SWAPA, reassignment rates increased by 85 percent and have risen even further by between 30 percent and 50 percent in 2022. “Since last summer, our Pilots have lost more than 18,000 days off when the Company forced them to

work on a day when they weren't previously scheduled." "This constant failure leads to delays, resulting in more reassignments."

Delta's Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) spokesperson, Evan Baach, pointed to a "record amount of overtime" by the airline's pilots, with more overtime flown in 2022 than in 2018 and 2019 combined.

One pilot told CNN that he began experiencing heightened fatigue mid-flight in November. "Both of us were yawning and eye rubbing halfway through our 6+ hour flight... I was physically unable to keep up," despite having "appropriate, average sleep the night before."

"But 'we' press on—don't we?" the pilot said. "Our threats are threefold of the pre-COVID environment. We've been facing delays, shortages, planning and staffing issues that are NOT being taken into account in building schedules. Why? Because we pilots are counted upon to make it work."

Massive job losses for workers, tens of billions in bailouts for the airlines

With the passage of the CARES Act in 2020, airlines received \$54 billion in federal bailouts ostensibly to avoid mass layoffs and bankruptcy. Despite this federal aid, airlines began to massively furlough and lay off workers during the time when air travel was at a historic low. These bailouts were supposed to "ensure they were ready for the recovery by retaining and keeping pilots trained [and] current, so they could fly immediately as demand returned," Trajer said.

In North America, there is a pilot shortage of about 8,000 trained and current pilots that is expected to worsen over the next decade. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 188 communities have already lost over 25 percent of their air service, according to Regional Airline Association CEO Faye Malarkey Black. Boeing described the demand for pilots in its latest Pilot and Technician Outlook report saying 602,000 pilots will be needed for international commercial flights with 128,000 needed just for the North American demand.

The pilot shortage and fatigue issues go hand in hand. They also are not limited to the United States. In August there was a report that two Ethiopian Airlines pilots missed their scheduled landing because they both fell asleep at the same time. They only awoke when an alarm went off as the autopilot disengaged after they passed their destination.

Staffing issues in the industry are not limited to pilots. Air traffic controllers for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) are at their lowest staffing numbers in decades, with mandatory six-day workweeks being the norm in most facilities across the US.

The lessons of the railroad struggle

The conditions which pilots face are strikingly similar to those faced by rail crews in the United States. Rail conductors and engineers across all major railroads are on call 24/7 and experience constant schedule uncertainty which leaves workers unable to schedule doctors' appointments or spend time with family. Both industries are under the jurisdiction of the anti-worker Railway Labor Act, which severely curtails workers' democratic right to strike, and both pilots and rail workers have been working under an old contract for three years. As with the pilots, engineers voted by 99.5 percent to authorize strike action, but instead have been presented with a sellout contract by the rail unions which resolves none of their demands.

The experience of railroaders is a serious warning for pilots. While railroaders are unanimous in their determination to fight for better working conditions, they face not only a ruthless management but a corrupt union bureaucracy, working hand-in-glove with Washington to force through a substandard contract and prevent strike action. Even though the terms of the Railway Labor Act were exhausted on September 16, the rail unions have continued to keep workers on the job under endless "status quo" extensions while deliberately ceding the initiative to Congress by delaying until after the midterm elections. There can be no doubt that similar behind-the-scenes talks between pilots union officials and the White House are already underway.

In response, railroad workers have formed a new organ, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The RWRFC is fighting to give railroaders the means to share information, discuss strategy and coordinate actions independent of and in opposition to the apparatus, and to provide the means to countermand decisions taken by union officials in violation of the will of the membership.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact