

Thousands of airline travelers stranded following deadly winter storm, meltdown at Southwest Airlines

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Hundreds of thousands of holiday travelers have been stranded at airports across the United States following a mass wave of flight cancellations that began last week, and has continued through this week. According to flight-tracking website Flight Aware, nearly 20,000 flights in the US have been canceled since December 22, with thousands more expected to be canceled this week and into next.

On Tuesday, Flight Aware reported that 52 percent of the flights scheduled at Denver International airport were canceled or delayed. Similar figures were reported at Midway airport in Chicago, where 43 percent of Tuesday's flights were canceled outright and another 17 percent delayed. At the Baltimore/Washington International Airport, a staggering 66 percent of all flights on Tuesday were canceled or delayed.

While deadly Winter Storm Elliot was the catalyst for the initial onslaught of flight cancellations, parasitic profit-driven operations at the major airlines have exacerbated travel woes for thousands of people and strained already exhausted and overworked airline workers.

In contrast to the other major carriers, Southwest Airlines, the fourth largest carrier in the US, has continued to experience unprecedented cancellations far exceeding every other airline. According to Flight Aware, of the 3,137 flights canceled on Tuesday, 2,664 flights, or roughly 85 percent, were attributed to Southwest Airlines. Comparatively, Spirit, which had the second most cancellations on Tuesday, recorded 94 canceled flights while United had only 74.

On Monday, the day after Christmas as hundreds of thousand of Americans attempted to fly back home, over 4,000 flights were canceled in the US with Southwest accounting for 72 percent of all cancellations.

Frustrated and angry travelers, some who have been sleeping in airports since Friday, have flooded social media with videos showing long lines and seas of unclaimed luggage.

Holiday traveler Talia Jones told CBS in Dallas Fort-Worth that she was “beyond frustrated and hurt” after her flight was canceled, forcing her to miss out on seeing her parents for Christmas.

At the William P. Hobby airport in Houston on Monday, ABC News reporter Shelley Childers reported that the Houston Police increased their “security presence” prior to Southwest telling passengers, many of whom had been waiting in lines for hours, that they will not be offering to reschedule flights until January 1, 2023, at the earliest.

Aremelder Woolens was scheduled to depart Christmas Eve from Lambert Airport in St. Louis, but like thousands of other travelers had her flight delayed several times before it was canceled.

Woolens told KSDK-NBC in St. Louis that she had to stay at the airport because her bag was checked and the airline has been unable to locate it. “I need my luggage because my medicine is in my luggage,” Woollens told KSDK. “All of my medicine. My blood pressure, my kidney medicine.”

It is not just travelers who have been stranded at airports across the country. Thousands of flight crew have also been forced to languish in terminals after their flights were delayed and canceled.

Exposing as a lie initial claims from the company that the delays were due solely to the weather, on Tuesday Southwest announced that a majority of their flights, roughly two-thirds, will be canceled for the rest of the year. On a call with workers that was leaked to CNN on Tuesday, Southwest Chief Operating Officer Andrew Watterson acknowledged that the company's outdated scheduling system was unable to handle the necessary task of pairing crews with planes that needed to be rerouted following the storm.

“The process of matching up those crew members with the aircraft could not be handled by our technology,” Watterson said. “As a result, we had to ask our crew schedulers to do this manually, and it's extraordinarily difficult,” Watterson said, according to CNN. “That is a tedious, long process,” he added.

Like every major US airline, Southwest Airlines greedily lapped up billions in government handouts at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Thanks to \$2.7 billion in government payroll support that covered roughly six months of workers salaries, the airline claimed \$977 million in profit in 2021.

While Southwest, with nearly a billion dollars in profit last year, is incapable of rescheduling flights in a timely fashion, like clockwork earlier this month the company declared its 175th quarterly dividend dating back more than 40 years.

The dividend amount, the company boasted, “is equivalent to its dividend prior to the pandemic, and amounts to approximately \$428 million,” which will be paid to shareholders on January 31, 2023.

While shareholders are reaping millions, overworked airline workers are bending over backwards, sleeping at airports in-between working double-digit hour shifts, attempting to overcome the problems created by the refusal of airline management over decades to invest in modern technology.

In a social media post that went viral, one Southwest First officer explained that the airline “has imploded. Their antiquated software system has completely fried. Planes are parked. Crews are stranded in the airports with the passengers, volunteering to take the passengers in the parked planes but the software won’t accept it. Phone lines are overwhelmed for both passenger and crews.”

The flight officer said they “personally spent over two hours trying to get a hold of anyone in the company last night after midnight...Gate agents are in tears. They’ve been yelled at, cussed [at], slapped and spit on. Flight attendants have been taking a beating. The frontline employees have had little support or communications. Terminals are standing room only with people having been there for days. Pilot lounges are packed with pilots ready to fly and nowhere to go.”

Captain Casey Murray, a pilot and the president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association told CNN on Tuesday that outdated computer technology and scheduling systems at Southwest had previously led to “these sorts of meltdowns” in the past but now they are occurring “on a much more regular basis.”

Murray told CNN that the airline’s operations had not changed much since the 1990s. “It’s phones, it’s computers, it’s processing powers, it’s the programs used to connect us to airplanes—that’s where the problem lies, and it’s systemic throughout the whole airline.”

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* Monday evening, CEO of Southwest Airlines Robert Jordan said the scale of cancellations and delays was the “largest” he had ever seen, and that the problems would continue.

“We had a tough day today. In all likelihood we’ll have another

tough day tomorrow,” Jordan told the *Journal*. Jordan became the CEO of Southwest earlier this year. As with every executive of a major corporation, the size of Jordan’s compensation package is predicated on increasing the stock price of the company above else. The *Dallas Morning News* reported earlier this year that upon taking over as CEO, Jordan got a base salary increase from \$185,000 to \$700,000 and various bonuses that could result in him “earning” about \$9 million in salary this year.

After days of claiming delays and cancellations were solely due to the winter weather, in a mealy-mouthed statement released Tuesday, Southwest wrote that the “magnitude” and “volume” of “changes to our flight schedule” left workers with “tools...operating at a capacity.”

Unable, or unwilling, to reschedule flights before the end of the last quarter of 2022, the airline said it would be “operating at a reduced schedule by flying roughly one third of our schedule for the next several days.”

Seeking to give the veneer of accountability where none exists, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer that in a meeting with Southwest CEO Jordan on Tuesday he “made clear that our department will be holding them accountable for their responsibilities to customers, both to get through this situation and to make sure that this can’t happen again.”

As an example of this “accountability” Buttigieg pointed to wrist-slap fines levied by the US Department of Transportation against six airlines earlier this year for failing to provide refunds to customers after cancelling their flights. The fines totaled just over \$7 million with largest of these fines levied against Frontier Airlines for a mere \$2.2 million.



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