

Union “sets stage” for strike vote by 6,000 FedEx pilots in US

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Late last month, FedEx Express Master Executive Council (MEC) of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) approved a resolution “setting the stage” for a strike authorization vote by 6,000 FedEx pilots in the US. ALPA executives took the move—which did not set a date for a strike vote—in the face of growing anger by pilots over stalled contract negotiations, the impact of inflation on their living standards and exhausting work conditions.

“The decision to move closer to a strike authorization vote is the result of nearly six months of federally mediated negotiations that has led to our disappointment with FedEx management’s actions at the bargaining table,” said FedEx MEC chair Captain Chris Norman.

The bargaining and strike process of FedEx MEC and ALPA fall within the bounds of the infamous Railway Labor Act (RLA), which essentially blocks strikes by rail and airline workers through a series of byzantine “cooling off” periods, mediations by pro-corporate national boards and congressional interventions.

For FedEx pilots to strike under the RLA, they must be released by the National Mediation Board (NMB) and then complete a 30-day “cooling off” period. They can then be sent back into mediation and further cooling off periods depending on the maneuvers between the union and management.

“FedEx pilots are committed to reaching a deal with management, but we will not waver in our commitment to deliver a contract that rewards pilots for their sacrifices to build FedEx into the global leader it is today,” Norman stated. “Although a strike authorization vote has not been called at this time, our customers and shareholders should be aware that the pilots may be headed in that direction shortly.”

ALPA and other airline unions have a long record of

stymieing strike action and capitulating to company demands while forcing workers to stay on the job even after strike authorization has been voted on. Last October, Delta pilots voted to authorize a strike after years of failed negotiations. Despite this strike authorization, negotiations were extended for another month by the union while crews were ordered to stay on the job. These pilots had been already working without a contract for three years while pandemic inflation surged and risk of infection to flight crews remained a very real danger.

After the stalling by union executives, Delta pilots were presented with an “agreement in principle” by ALPA, which included raises under the rate of inflation and thus gave pilots an effective pay reduction. The agreement aimed at pilot retention simply by promising that their meager “raises” would be slightly above their competitors’ salaries.

The opening stages of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a precipitous drop in air travel. Conversely, freight and package delivery industries had a sharp spike in usage of their services, including FedEx. As a result, FedEx shares doubled between 2020 and 2021. As the package delivery giant raked in record profits and the pandemic raged, FedEx workers including pilots were forced to stay on the job at high risk of infection to keep the industry running.

There is a growing movement among airline pilots and other flight crew against fatigue, overwork and sub-inflation pay raises. Since October, 15,000 Delta Air Lines pilots voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike, United Airlines pilots rejected a tentative agreement by a vote of 94 percent and officials in the Allied Pilots Association (APA) at American Airlines were forced to vote down a new deal by 15–5. Pilots and flight attendants held informational pickets at major US

airports last year, and flight crews internationally have gone on strike at Eurowings in Germany and Ryanair in Spain.

FedEx pilots should take warning that ALPA, the largest airline pilot union in the world with over 67,000 pilots at 39 US and Canadian airlines, has kept each of these struggles by pilots isolated from the others and so more easily contained and defeated.

At the same time, FedEx flight crews are in a direct battle against the courts, Congress and the Biden administration, which would quickly try to illegalize any strike. Pilots should take a lesson from the struggles of the railroaders that culminated in Congress and President Biden—the self-proclaimed most “pro-union” president in history—coming together in a bipartisan dictatorial bill passed in record time to prevent a strike and impose a pro-company agreement.

The railroad unions managed to delay and obstruct strike action long enough for the state to take action to protect the companies from having their flow of profits interrupted.

Flight crews should follow the lead of railroad workers who have formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC). The RWRFC is a means for railroad workers to share information, discuss strategy and coordinate actions and transfer decision-making power from the union apparatus to the workers themselves. The RWRFC provides workers with the means to countermand the decisions taken by union bureaucracy, which violate the will and needs of rank-and-file workers.

Pilots and crewmembers interested in assistance in forming such committees should contact the WSWS today.



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