

Air traffic controllers outraged over union bureaucrats' junket to Hawaii

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Are you an air traffic controller? Tell us what you think about the NATCA's trip to Honolulu by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On March 30, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) posted an update on their web page which sparked outrage among rank-and-file air traffic controllers online. It said that NATCA's National Executive Board (NEB) would be meeting for two days in Honolulu, Hawaii, to discuss policy between union conventions.

Air traffic controllers, most of whom are working mandatory six-day workweeks while losing money to inflation and skyrocketing costs of living, took umbrage at the brazen misuse of their dues money for luxury travel by union bureaucrats, who work 9-5 in an office five days per week while still collecting the benefits of air traffic controllers.

Controllers were furious on the air traffic control subreddit, where controllers from around the country can gather to exchange information more freely than they are allowed to do on the NATCA union's official online groups, where comments are routinely disabled or deleted if they are critical of the union.

"No way this meeting could have been done anywhere else ... like, say ... at HQ ... in a building that they own. Nope. Impossible. Had to be done at the most expensive place they could possibly find," one worker quipped. Another said: "It's an internal policy discussion. This literally could be a Zoom call or even an email chain. But instead, NATCA's shelling out tens of thousands of dollars for these idiots to sit on a Hawaiian beach for a few days."

The NATCA's NEB is meeting in Honolulu in the first stop of what will be a yearlong touring meeting schedule with locations including Kansas City,

Missouri; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Salt Lake City, Utah; Anchorage, Alaska; Portland, Maine; Washington D.C. and Austin, Texas. The fact that most of these cities do not include tropical beach resorts was no consolation to controllers, one of whom said "those are all a waste of [dues] money."

Air traffic control staffing has been a chronic problem for most of the last 40 years, since President Ronald Reagan fired 13,000 striking PATCO members in August 1981. Ironically, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) was on strike to demand higher staffing, shorter workweeks and higher wages, all issues that air traffic controllers of today are still suffering from. In 1981 there were approximately 17,000 air traffic controllers separating US flights carrying 0.8 billion passengers. Today there are only approximately 10,500 covering an industry which carries over 4 billion passengers per year in the US.

NATCA was formed six years later in 1987 by strikebreaking scabs under the condition that they promised the Federal Government they would never undertake a work action and would instead collaborate with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to enact and enforce their policies, conduct training and help to implement job-killing automation.

The Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the FAA and NATCA was due to expire last summer. Many controllers anticipated that NATCA would bargain for a better contract to account for declining real wages, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and shore up deteriorating benefits where newer workers consistently pay more for benefits than more senior workers.

Instead, the union secretly took an offer from the FAA bargaining team in 2021 to extend the contract behind their membership's back for five more years.

When the self-congratulatory announcement was revealed to workers, many responded with shock and anger that no bargaining was done at all in what was believed to be the best chance for fighting for better working conditions in decades.

Any bargaining would have been undertaken during the Biden administration, with President Biden describing himself as the most “pro-union President in history.” Many workers viewed this as a missed opportunity since the next negotiations might take place under an administration more hostile to workers.

In reality, the “pro-union” Biden has relied on union bureaucrats to prevent strikes and curb wage growth. When these attempts failed in the railroad industry, when workers rejected a contract brokered by the White House, Biden responded by going to Congress, where both parties voted to ban a strike.

Controllers also expected improvements in the hiring, placement and transfer system called NCEPT that currently places many controllers in facilities where they do not want to be, far away from home and family, with little to no hope of being able to transfer back home short of quitting and reapplying. This was a door that was rapidly closed by management and the union because of the numerous workers desperate enough to use it.

During the recent FAA reauthorization hearing, NATCA President Rich Santa reported to Congress that “we have a very solid transfer system [for controllers],” a comment that received ridicule from workers unable to transfer for years with no end in sight.

Many controllers sense that NATCA does not promote their interests and is instead in bed with the FAA and the airline corporations. These workers often resign themselves to supporting NATCA as the default best practice while lowering their expectations.

Air traffic workers are becoming more conscious that their work/life balance, working conditions and quality of life are in decline and that the union has no interest in waging a struggle against the FAA and the federal government.

These workers should follow the example of railroad workers, educators, autoworkers and others in forming their own rank-and-file committees where workers can share information and discuss strategy about fighting for their own interests independent of NATCA, which has its own separate interests opposed to those of its

membership.

Air traffic controllers should contact the WSWs for assistance in forming these committees and joining with the growing network of rank-and-file committees in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to win the demands of workers internationally.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact