

FedEx pilots vote out union chair who negotiated rejected contract

Claude Delphian
3 November 2023

FedEx pilots replaced the chair of their union last week, following their rejection of a sellout tentative agreement in July. The Master Executive Council (MEC), the FedEx branch of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), on Monday reported the replacement of Chris Norman, who was heavily involved in shaping the tentative agreement, which workers rejected for its substandard wage increases and poor job security.

Norman was replaced by Billy Wilson for an interim period ending in March 2025. Wilson claims to support pay and benefits that more closely match those of the other major US airlines, where workers received larger wage increases than the union had even initially demanded during contract negotiations at FedEx. “I am committed to bringing all of our pilots together as we reestablish negotiations,” Wilson said.

Wilson pointed out that FedEx pilots helped to ship necessary goods when many other businesses shut down in 2020 near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. “We paid a heavy price for this while the company made historic profits,” he said.

The TA rejected by FedEx pilots included a 30 percent cumulative pay raise along with a 30 percent increase to workers’ legacy pensions. Delta Air Lines pilots approved a contract including a 34 percent pay raise in March, and the new contract for American Airlines pilots in August includes a pay increase of 46 percent over the life of the deal. United Airlines pilots agreed to a 40.2 percent increase in September. These increases are considerably larger than those requested by ALPA for FedEx pilots, even though those contracts also fell short of worker demands to reverse years of stagnant wages and inflation as well as improve work-life balance.

Southwest pilots voted to authorize a strike over their

contract negotiations earlier this year, but are held in mandatory mediation until November 30, when they will either be released by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to strike during the holidays, or more likely sent to another round of negotiations to keep them working through the holidays. This is due to provisions in the notorious Railway Labor Act, which has also covered airline workers since the 1930s, and which was used last year to block a strike by 120,000 railroad workers.

Last Thursday, Southwest pilots performed an informal picket outside of company headquarters demanding better pay and working conditions. The picket was held during an event at the Dallas headquarters that purportedly highlighted “Southwest culture,” a buzz phrase that often gets leveled at the company’s workers in an attempt to make them feel better about being exploited by the company.

Captain Casey Murray, the president of Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA), highlighted the disconnect between the company and its workers at the \$600 per ticket event. He said, “On the outside, it looks really good. It’s like the landscaping and painting is really good. But the inside is kind of falling apart and that really is how the front line employees feel.”

In August, Southwest flight attendants gathered outside a corporate party held in Wrigleyville in Chicago, Illinois to protest having not received a raise in four and a half years. “Southwest Airlines is having a lot of problems and flight attendants have been there during the December meltdown, during other irregular operations and Southwest Airlines has rewarded itself, they have rewarded executives and they have yet to pay and invest with their [workers],” said Lyn Montgomery, president for TWU Local 556.

On Thursday, hundreds of United Airlines flight

attendants picketed at airports around the United States as part of a nationwide day of action. United flight attendants were protesting the breakdown of negotiations over their own contract and are looking for increased pay and better scheduling rules.

“Nineteen different airlines, 50,000 flight attendants across America and we stand strong and we will stand until United Airlines flight attendants win,” said Dante Harris, International Secretary-Treasurer for the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA. “There is a serious delay in contract negotiations.”

American Airlines flight attendants voted in August by 99.4 percent to authorize a strike should contract negotiations break down. Informational pickets were set up at airports across the United States where workers carried signs with slogans like “Ready to Strike” and “More Work Less Pay: It’s the AA Way.”

APFA national president Julie Hendrick, who was at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport picket, said, “We should work for a company that values us, not a company that makes us fight for a contract.”

The quotes by union officials above highlight the division between the perspective of the workers and that of the trade unions. Above all, the union officials desire an end to the struggle for better treatment and higher wages and for the company to “come to its senses” and treat their members better. There is no company that will ever “value” workers above the profits that they are able to extract from them.

In the last few years, workers in many industries and countries have overwhelmingly voted to strike and yet have been held back from any real action and led to believe that negotiations will produce acceptable results. Time and again, workers have been handed sellout contracts they didn't even have time to study with much lower raises and worse conditions than they were demanding.

The pilots at FedEx clearly expressed their determination to fight for substantial improvements by rejecting the contract and replacing the bureaucrat who was instrumental in crafting the sellout contract. But his replacement was only a built-in relief valve that serves the union bureaucracy in maintaining their control over their members, while letting them vent their frustrations uselessly. Nothing will fundamentally change in pilots’ struggles with the company until they take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and wage it

on their own terms until winning their whole demands and nothing less.

FedEx pilots, and all airline workers, need to take the fight into their own hands and join the growing network of rank-and-file committees organized by workers where information can be freely shared between workers and a strategy for winning worker demands can be formed outside of the control of the union bureaucracies who want a quick end to strikes and no disruption to company profits.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact