

Holiday strikes of pilots, flight attendants blocked by Railway Labor Act

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Strike threats from American Airlines (AA) flight attendants and Southwest Airlines pilots were averted last week thanks in large part to the notorious Railway Labor Act (RLA), thereby blocking end-of-year strikes during the holiday season.

The RLA is the same anti-democratic legislation used to block a strike by 120,000 railroad workers last year. When the provisions of the RLA were exhausted in mid-September, the administration relied on the bureaucracies in the railroad unions to delay a further two months while the White House and Congress prepared legislation to ban a strike and impose the contract which workers had already rejected.

American Airlines flight attendants voted 99.5 percent in favor of a strike if their demands, which included 50 percent pay increases, were not met. However, under the RLA, which heavily infringes on workers' democratic right to strike, they must first be released from further mandatory negotiations by the National Mediation Board. A 30 day cooling-off period would then take effect, during which the White House or Congress or both could intervene to block a strike. If that did not take place, then flight attendants could strike once the 30 days elapsed.

However, the NMB refused to release the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) from talks, sending them back to mandatory talks last Tuesday, November 28. The flight attendants have been working under an expired contract for years.

The Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA), which includes 11,000 pilots for the airline, was reported to be setting up regional strike centers in Baltimore, Maryland; Dallas, Texas; and in other major hub cities, in anticipation of a strike which could have started as early as December 30, the day before New Year's Eve, when millions would be traveling for the

holiday season. Like the AA flight attendants, this would have required a release from the National Mediation Board, which had set a deadline of November 30 for the two sides to reach a deal at Southwest, and a subsequent cooling-off period. However, the union backed off on the strike threat at the last minute, claiming a deal was "within reach" at some point in the coming weeks. While this absolved the NMB of having to decide on whether an impasse had been reached, it is almost certain that it would have ruled against it.

Neither the union nor the company have divulged any specifics of the agreement to Southwest pilots.

Airline workers have been fighting for years against substandard pay raises and overwork. In the case of airline pilots, fatigue-related pilot call-ins have increased. Pilots are obligated to report to work fit for duty, and have to use sick leave if they feel they cannot perform. Duty periods for pilots range between 12 and 14 hours, and with the increased demand for travel, this has greatly affected workers' ability to perform, placing workers and passengers in danger.

The decision by the National Mediation Board is an injunction in all but name. The government has backed an industry which has laid thousands of airline workers off despite receiving tens of billions of dollars in bailout money through the CARES Act. This massive sum was falsely claimed necessary to protect workers' jobs during the COVID-19 lockdowns and slowdown in air travel. In reality, its purpose was to prop up profits of the airlines.

With COVID protections, however piecemeal and meager they were, allowed to lapse, and with the US government falsely claiming the pandemic over, airlines are back to pre-pandemic levels, greatly placing flight attendants, pilots, gate agents and the public at

large in danger of illness. Recent wastewater surveillance data shows that COVID has already reached the level of the summer surge, with the peak of the holiday traveling season not yet over.

In the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks, the airlines responded to an industry recession by laying off workers and reaping huge profits. Mergers and consolidations, such as American's 2013 merger with US Airways, Delta's 2005 merger with Northwest and the merger of United and Continental in 2010 led to the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs. In the case of the American-US Airways merger, thousands of workers' contracts were voided by a federal bankruptcy judge, pay was slashed by as much as 35 percent and 53,000 US Airways workers and retirees had their pensions terminated. The issues which pilots and airline workers confront are longstanding.

All of this is being done with the support of the trade union bureaucracies, who have for years betrayed the fight for better conditions. Sara Nelson, the international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA), openly brags about her role in securing bailout money even as the airlines slash workers' jobs and overwork them into sickness.

These pro-corporate bureaucracies, working hand-in-hand with management and the government, are a barrier to a serious struggle by workers in defense of jobs and working conditions. Last year, railroad workers formed the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, rejecting both the betrayals of the union apparatus and the entire anti-democratic legal framework to which they are subjected, and this committee was a powerful force in the campaign against the contract. Airline workers must learn from this experience, and organize themselves independently, based on the power of the working class, not appeals to pro-company courts and the two-party system.



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