

Swissport workers hold 1-day strike at Denver International Airport over unsafe working conditions

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Nearly 100 workers from the air cargo company Swissport conducted a one-day strike at Denver International Airport (DIA) on Monday to protest unsafe working conditions. Workers began the strike Sunday night and continued through the day on Monday, December 11.

Swissport workers at DIA say they are working in unsafe working conditions that have not been resolved by management, even after repeated complaints and a filing with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Complaints include that workers have been forced to work with broken and faulty equipment, in dangerous temperatures with heaters failing to work during the winter and with inadequate safety training. Workers have also said that a fire broke out in a warehouse earlier this year after an exposed floor heating machine was struck by a loading truck.

Andrew Guttman, a cargo agent for Swissport, told the *Denver Post*, “We want management to take our concerns seriously, so hopefully this is a way to get that to happen. If it’s not, we’ll keep working to get them to pay attention. We want to organize this because it matters to us.”

After being ignored by management for months, Guttman added, “We’re trying to get their attention, and we knew we had to go bigger in some way. After the second petition was circulated in August, we gave them a deadline of the following month to respond. When that didn’t happen, we had never stopped talking to each other, and this strike just felt like the next natural thing.

“I’ve just seen too many of my coworkers get hurt and be put in dangerous situations at work over the past year. We’ve delivered petitions, filed multiple OSHA complaints, and Swissport has refused to address the real safety concerns that are putting our lives at risk on the

job.”

Swissport workers are not unionized at DIA, but roughly 1,200 workers at the airport are members of the Service Employees International Union. The SEIU was reportedly contacted by Swissport workers for help after they raised upwards of 90 signatures for a strike notice against the company. Striking workers were joined on the picket outside of the airport by SEIU representatives, along with other workers at the airport, community members and local politicians, according to a press release from the SEIU.

The strike primarily impacted Amazon package delivery and did not affect commercial flights at DIA.

This is not the first time that Swissport workers have organized a strike. Swissport workers at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport staged a one-day strike last week, and Swissport workers at La Guardia Airport in New York City staged a strike for better pay and safer working conditions in November. Workers have raised similar concerns to those at DIA and were following up a one-day walkout in June which was accompanied by strikes at Boston’s Logan Airport and Dulles Airport outside of Washington D.C.

These strikes are part of an international upsurge of airline/airport workers. Last week 1,100 workers at DHL went on strike at the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport. Ramp and tug cargo workers voted by 98 percent to authorize the strike and have been supported in recent days by solidarity pickets at airports in Chicago and Kentucky. The Cincinnati airport is one of three “Global Superhubs” managed by DHL that processes 350,000 packages a day.

Flight attendants at American Airlines also voted by 99.5 percent to authorize strike action but were blocked from striking by the reactionary Railway Labor Act, the

same act that was used to prevent a strike of railroad workers last winter. Pilots at Southwest Airlines were preparing to take strike action as well at the end of the month, but the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA) called off strike preparations on the claims that a deal was “within reach.” Southwest flight attendants rejected a tentative agreement last week with a 36 percent pay raise over the next five years, reflecting that workers are not willing to step back from their demands. American Airlines flight attendants are demanding a 50 percent pay rise.

Workers at airports, from ground crews to flight attendants and pilots alike, are facing the same fundamental issues. Wages and benefits are under assault by the airport and airline companies, and safety continues to be an afterthought, putting the health and lives of workers at risk.

Swissport workers and airport workers around the country make poverty wages. The average Swissport worker makes around \$17 an hour with workers in major cities making upwards of \$20 an hour. In many cities this is just above the minimum wage and barely enough to live on. One worker at La Guardia told *The City* that Swissport workers are not provided with proper protective equipment and must spend hundreds of dollars a year to furnish their own.

In Denver, the average rent is \$1,600 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. At \$20 an hour, a Swissport employee would be left with less than \$1,000 a month after rent and taxes to pay for food, utilities, insurance, transportation and other necessities.

Such low wages are coupled with a poor safety record at Swissport that puts workers’ lives at risk. Since 2000, the company has paid \$138,000 in fines for 16 safety-related violations. This figure is undoubtedly a gross undercount of the true workplace hazards facing Swissport workers. The workers at La Guardia allege at least one incident in which a fecal waste tube fell loose and sprayed a worker.

The total fines are also a drop in the bucket for Swissport’s profits. The company has reported earnings of over \$3 billion a year with profits of roughly \$275 million. These profits are not for the workers but for Wall Street.

Swissport is owned by a conglomerate of major financial institutions and private equity firms. Notable among them is Apollo Global Management, which just this past summer played a leading role in the bankruptcy and dismantling of Yellow, the third largest LTL trucking company in the US. Apollo guided the company into

bankruptcy after it ran low on cash reserves, laying off 30,000 workers, including 22,000 Teamsters. Apollo then sold \$500 million of Yellow’s debt to Citadel to cut itself a tidy profit off of the destruction of tens of thousands of livelihoods.

Apollo and private equity firms like it are notorious for purchasing companies and demanding massive layoffs and cuts to pay and benefits to extract as much wealth as possible. Under control by firms like Apollo, Swissport is disinclined to respond to workers complaints and will continue with its unsafe practices for as long as it can.

Swissport workers have taken a courageous action to stand up for their rights. The SEIU, however, which has been involved in these strikes, cannot be trusted to carry this movement of airport workers forward. The SEIU has a history of sabotaging workers’ struggles and canceling strikes.

During the height of the pandemic, the SEIU canceled strike action by thousands of nursing home workers in Connecticut three times, collaborating with multimillionaire Governor Ned Lamont, who had threatened to call out the National Guard to force workers back on the job if they walked out.

This spring the SEIU pushed through a sellout contract on 65,000 public school teachers and staff after keeping workers on the job without a contract for three years. Then this fall the SEIU sold out 100,000 California government workers and 75,000 Kaiser workers with contracts that included sub-inflation raises.

Airport and airline workers will need to take the struggles into their own hands, and out of the union bureaucracy’s, to wage a unified fight against the corporate assault on working conditions and living standards.



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