

After decisive contract rejection, Southwest Airlines flight attendant union calls for revote, based on unsubstantiated claims of fraud

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In an attack on the rights of airline workers, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) has called for a revote, based on unsubstantiated and vague allegations of fraud after Southwest Airlines flight attendants decisively rejected a tentative agreement (TA) by a vote of 64 percent to 36 percent. The turnout was reported at 95 percent.

The deal between the TWU and Southwest called for an immediate wage increase of 20 percent on January 1, 2024, followed by 3 percent raises in subsequent years and retroactive pay going back to 2019, totaling a 36 percent raise over five years.

The TA also included an inadequate pay for flight attendants on standby, where a flight attendant is assigned to wait at an airport terminal until a specific flight assignment is made. The TA also provided overtime pay to workers on standby.

Despite the solid vote to reject the TA, or rather because of it, the union is crying “foul” against the voting service provider that tallied the votes, TrueBallot. TWU Local 556 told members in a memo that they had received “numerous complaints” of voting anomalies such as inoperative hyperlinks, frozen webpages, blank screens, and the system showing that a member voted but no vote was tallied.

Alleging vote tampering, without providing evidence, the union leadership is refusing to certify the results of the contract rejection vote and is preparing for a re-vote at a later date. While the TWU claims that it does not believe a second vote will change the results, it is pursuing legal action against TrueBallot. Despite this, there can be little doubt that the TWU leadership hopes to use the rerun of the vote to ram the sell-out contract.

The previous contract between the TWU and Southwest became open to amendment in 2018. As with flight attendants at the other major US air carriers, Southwest flight attendants are determined to win higher pay and a better work-life balance.

According to Glassdoor, the average hourly pay as of

December 2023 for Southwest flight attendants is \$22.63, or \$47,079 annually. Flight attendants work brutal shifts outside of the “normal” 9 am to 5 pm schedule, often working all hours of the day and night under constantly-changing flight schedules. During a typical month, flight attendants work approximately 65 to 90 flight hours while working another 50 hours preparing the airplane before takeoff.

In a livestream at the close of voting to announce the results of the ratification vote union officials reported there was “significant consternation” due to the delay between the end of the vote and the arrival of the TrueBallot representative who was to announce the results. When the vote totals were at last revealed, “some” noticed a discrepancy between the total number of “Yes” and “No” votes and the total number of ballots cast. Apparently, when the TrueBallot representative shared his screen to show the vote totals, they also showed the web address in the address bar that would permit anyone viewing to view every member's name, how they voted, their email addresses, and give access to add or delete votes.

While this confirms the unencrypted and unsecured nature of the TrueBallot voting system, it is not at all clear how it would have been possible to change enough votes in such a short window of time to impact the result, given the nearly 2-1 margin to reject.

TWU Local 556 President Lyn Montgomery, in a video on the union Facebook page, told members that TrueBallot had informed them “their system was unsecured, leaving it open to vulnerabilities.”

However, TrueBallot assured the TWU Board of Election that there were no issues with the voting system. In a statement to Reuters, TrueBallot said, “we are now aware of the video by the Executive Board, which makes certain factual representations that are simply not true.”

In a typical anti-democratic move, the TWU touted the contract on the union's Facebook page while keeping the

comments turned off so that members could not provide negative feedback.

The bureaucratic attempt by the TWU leadership to force through a revote, without clear evidence of fraud and in the face of a wide vote to reject, is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of the rank-and-file and must be opposed by all workers.

The TA with flight attendants at Southwest Airlines is the first such agreement reached by a major airline with cabin crew since the start of the pandemic, as contact negotiations continue at the other air carriers.

American Airlines and United Airlines Flight attendants will likely not see a new contract until 2024, as talks with pilot unions have taken precedence thus far. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) was expecting to participate in mediated negotiations starting December 12. The pro-company National Mediation Board on Tuesday rejected the union's request to avoid mediation, which inevitably produces an outcome favorable to management.

APFA lamely told members, "If they fail again to present a realistic proposal to resolve these negotiations, we will reiterate our request to be released [from mediation]." If such a release were granted, a 30-day "cooling off" period would be enforced, after which APFA would be free to strike, as long as another round of mediation isn't imposed, as is likely, starting the cycle over again. It should be noted that a 30-day "cooling off" period starting in late December would push the conflict safely out of the busy holiday season, severely decreasing the leverage of flight attendants.

"We have a right to strike under the Railway Labor Act," APFA President Julie Hendrick said in a message to members in November. "American Airlines management thinks they can evade the issue, but they are mistaken." In fact, management is well aware it can rely on the APFA bureaucracy to evade the issue by postponing potential strike action until after the holidays, if not indefinitely.

United Airlines flight attendants picketed December 14 at large United hubs in the United States in a "Day of Action," called by the union ostensibly to oppose further delays in negotiations but primarily aimed at defusing workers' anger.

United flight attendants are represented in negotiations by the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), as are flight attendants at Alaska Airlines. AFA is the largest flight attendant union with about 50,000 members at 20 airlines. Alaska flight attendants are also currently in contract talks.

AFA President Sara Nelson, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, engaging in her trademark militant-sounding bluster, declared, "I can't think of another time in history when we've been able to take on the entire industry and dramatically raise working conditions and wages for flight attendants.

"We are going to make historic gains," Nelson continued. "It will take more strike votes and more actions, but we're all fighting for the same issues—control of our time at work, higher wages, pay for all of our time on the job and better retirement."

This has nothing to do with workers' actual experience. In fact, a pattern has repeated itself. The airline unions drag out negotiations for years, wearing down workers' resistance by accommodating endless management extensions and delays. Eventually a totally inadequate contract deal is announced and votes hastily organized, with workers provided little more than self-serving "highlights." If workers vote down the contract, the same rotten deal is repackaged and further votes organized until a management-friendly contract deal can be imposed.

The last strike by flight attendants was 30 years ago, in 1993, when American Airlines flight attendants struck for four days. Not surprisingly, since that time, pay and working conditions for all airline workers have continually worsened.

Instead of waging a united struggle, the airline unions have kept airline workers separated, laboring under terms of separate contracts with different expiration dates. The unions have also made sure US airline workers have been divided from fellow transport workers in other industries and different parts of the world, who share the exact same struggle.

To oppose this union-management conspiracy Southwest Airlines airline workers and all airline workers need their own organizations, rank-and-file committees, where workers can discuss their issues in a democratic manner and map out a plan of struggle. Workers must reject a revote and vote down any contract that does not end abusive work schedules, provide significant wage increases and full inflation offsets and defend all jobs. Rank and file committees must seek to wage the broadest struggle, uniting workers at different airlines and different airline crafts, in the US and globally, into a common fight against transnational air transport companies.



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