

Tentative agreement for American Airlines flight attendants mirrors sellouts in auto, UPS and rail

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23 July 2024

Flight attendants, tell us what you think of the APFA contract! Fill out the form below with your comments. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Last Friday, American Airlines announced a tentative agreement with 28,000 flight attendants after more than three years of negotiations. Once approved by the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) board, the tentative agreement (TA) will pass on to the membership for ratification.

While details have not been made public, the circumstances make clear it can be nothing except a sellout. It would effectively preempt a national strike, which could take place as early as Labor Day weekend, and latest reports showed that a deal was still far away. Flight attendants in June rejected the airline's latest offer and authorized the APFA to call a strike when talks broke down. This was the second time since last August that flight attendants authorized a strike.

But now, supposedly out of nowhere, a new contract has arisen with "significant benefits for our Flight Attendants," according APFA National President Julie Hedrick, including on "compensation, work rules, and retroactive pay." If this were true, the union would not have hesitated to shout from the rooftops precisely what these gains are.

Flight attendants should reject the deal on principle. A strike in September would place them in a far more favorable position to win their demands. Contracts also expire in September for 33,000 Boeing machinists, who are fighting against corporate cost-cutting to airplane safety, and for 45,000 port workers on the East Coast.

Contracts have already expired for tens of thousands of public school teachers in Chicago and Detroit, and the national contract for Class I railroads is up for renegotiation at the end of the year. Hundreds of thousands of postal workers across three unions are also fighting against a job-cutting restructuring program in their contract fights this year.

The outcome of the fight at American will also have significant repercussions for the next contracts at United and Alaskan Airlines, where talks are currently underway.

But this is precisely what the union bureaucrats, working with both management and the government, want to avoid. In particular, they want to prevent strikes in the lead-up to the crisis election in November, which would pose the emergence of a mass working class movement against the pro-corporate parties.

In response, flight attendants must prepare themselves for a fight against both management and the bureaucrats, as well as against any intervention by the government. This means the formation of rank-and-file committees to oversee the vote. A committee would act to ensure the integrity of the vote and that workers have adequate time and information to make an informed decision. It would then take measures to impose the democratic decisions made by American flight attendants, including the near-unanimous strike vote, against any further attempts to violate them.

American flight attendants had been fighting for a raise since January 1, 2019, when their previous contract expired. They have been fighting for better wages, working conditions and retroactive pay for the period of delayed talks caused by the lockdowns in the early stages of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The company had offered a 17 percent wage increase and more profit-sharing. Flight attendants were demanding a raise of around 33 percent to make up for five years without raises and record inflation and to compensate for the dangers of working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The circumstances behind the TA announcement closely mirror other major sellouts in recent years, in particular, on railroad workers in 2022 and on workers at UPS and the auto industry last year.

Airline workers are under the repressive provisions of the Railway Labor Act, which severely curtails their right to strike. Nevertheless, after three years of mandatory

bargaining the provisions of the act were nearly exhausted, and flight attendants were close to being released to engage in “self-help.”

This was the same position that railroad workers found themselves two years ago. But at the 11th hour before the strike deadline, the rail union bureaucracy announced a tentative agreement, brokered by the Biden administration. This contract met none of the workers’ demands, including for paid sick leave.

Workers stunned the union apparatus and the White House by rejecting the deal, but the unions still refused to call a strike, biding time until after the midterm elections so that Congress and the White House could pass anti-strike legislation and impose the deal.

In the American Airlines talks, the Biden administration has also been closely involved, as it has in every major contract over the last three and a half years. It sent Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and acting Labor Secretary Julie Su to keep tabs on the situation and ensure that a pro-corporate deal was passed. Buttigieg was instrumental in imposing the railroad contract, and Su played a leading role in ramming through a deal on the West Coast ports last year.

The APFA is also closely following the playbook established by the Teamsters at UPS. Using misdirection to present the contract as the product of “tough” talks, the Teamsters pretended to be preparing for a strike it had no intention of calling. They concealed the fact that the contract paved the way for tens of thousands of job cuts under the company’s new automated “Network of the Future.”

“Endless picketing events, engagement with the media and the traveling public, and a solid 99.47% ‘yes’ strike vote authorization pushed this management team to a tentative contract that rightfully addresses our scheduling and economic needs,” Hedrick said in a statement. “Strikes and the threat of strikes work.”

Even according to its own messaging, the APFA would have only called a limited strike, targeting certain flights instead of calling a nationwide walkout to bring the airline’s operations to a halt. The union claimed that this limited strike strategy would best serve the flight attendants because most of them would still get paychecks, as the union lacks the necessary strike fund to pay workers fully during a strike.

The APFA also told flight attendants to be prepared to miss credit card payments if they strike, an indication that the union bureaucracy was unprepared to strike and was willing to starve out the rank and file to end the struggle on unfavorable terms.

This is the same tactic employed by the United Auto Workers in its “stand-up strikes” last fall, which barely

dented production at US automakers. After weeks of fruitless picketing, the UAW rammed through a deal, endorsed by President Biden, which has since been used to lay off thousands of people.

If the APFA did not make financial preparations to fund a strike during three years (although it does control \$17 million in net assets, according to the latest filings with the Department of Labor), this only exposes the fact that it never intended to call a strike. Nevertheless, flight attendants could call upon workers in other unions to support them. The American trade unions controlled \$35.8 billion in net assets as of 2020, all of it financed through workers’ dues money.

Flight attendants face powerful adversaries, including the government, but these forces are themselves in crisis, as shown most recently by the withdrawal of Biden as the Democratic nominee and the degenerate spectacle at the Republican National Convention. They should take confidence that they can still win their demands, as long as they have organizations they control and a viable strategy on which to fight.

They must learn from the experiences of workers in the railroads, at UPS and auto, in particular, where workers formed rank-and-file committees to oppose the sellouts and government interventions. In its founding statement in September 2022, the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee explained its strategy in the following terms:

Our strength lies not in the pretended support of the Democrats but the real and powerful support from the working class. We must appeal for support from the dockworkers, the refinery workers, the tens of millions of workers around the country who are fighting against the same things as us. If we make a stand, workers will see us as the tip of the spear for a broad counteroffensive. This is exactly what Congress is afraid of, and why Biden, the railroads and their union accomplices are trying to keep us on the job: If a crack appears anywhere, then the whole dam is liable to break.

The same is true for American flight attendants today.



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