

Alaska Airlines flight attendants overwhelmingly reject sellout agreement, while opposition builds against American Airlines contract

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Flight attendants, fill out the form below to tell us what you think of the Alaska and American Airlines contracts! Comments will be published anonymously.

On August 14, flight attendants at Alaska Airlines voted overwhelmingly to reject a pro-company tentative agreement backed by the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) union. The deal was defeated by 68 percent, with a high turnout of 94 percent of the 6,900 flight attendants in the AFA at the airline.

The defeat of the contract is a major rebuke to the union apparatus, which had given its full backing to its so-called “record” deal. AFA President Sara Nelson, a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, had hailed the agreement as “leading the industry” in an interview in *Forbes* in July.

In attempting to rush through passage of the deal, the union opened voting before the contract language was even finalized, provoking indignant calls by workers for a postponement of the balloting.

“This is absolutely absurd,” one attendant commented on the AFA Alaska Facebook page earlier this month. “We do NOT yet have a FINAL & LEGALLY BINDING TA! Please answer the question which many of us have been asking. ... WHEN will we receive this? Voting should not have been opened yet, more less should we have a deadline to vote!”

Cynically, the AFA responded to the workers’ defeat of its deal with Alaska Airlines by declaring, “This is democracy in action and Flight Attendants always have the final say on any contract.”

The rejection of the deal by flight attendants at Alaska is part of a growing rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the union bureaucracies, which are working to impose corporate demands for mass job cuts, sub-inflation wages and grueling working conditions. On Sunday, auto parts workers at Dakota Integrated Systems in Chicago voted down a record fourth contract proposal with poverty wages pushed by the United Auto Workers union.

American Airlines: “Don’t get fooled people and read the contract”

The massive rejection of the Alaska Airlines contract has generated increased opposition among the 28,000 flight attendants at American Airlines to the tentative agreement brought back by a separate union, the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA), last month. The APFA sprung the deal on workers just a few weeks before a strike deadline was set to expire. Voting on the American Airlines contract has been underway since August 13, continuing until September 12.

The five-year contract proposal at American Airlines includes boarding pay, 33-36 percent pay raises and retroactive pay for the four years spent working since the last contract became amendable.

The deal is a pro-company agreement, as these terms were all basically what American Airlines had already been offering, with the exception of retroactive pay, which was only agreed to after Southwest Airline’s flight attendants received it first. Final negotiations saw the airline increase the raises offered by only 1 to 3 percentage points depending on seniority.

Flight attendants at American Airlines have similarly taken to social media to voice their opposition to the contract.

“What about duty time?” one commented on Facebook. “Are we getting pay for all time spent at the airport ??? How about the paragraph that talks about cleaning the planes ... I rather quit than cleaning airplanes. There’s a big NO on this TA, don’t get fooled people and read the contract.”

Another referred to the inadequacy of the pay raises given the sharp rise in the cost of living, commenting, “It would have been a reasonably good contract five years ago but it does not keep up with current inflation rates. It’s not a raise at all.”

The contract has sparked particular condemnation by retired flight attendants. One wrote, “As a recent retiree, what a slap in

face on retro pay!! Why even negotiate for all these years! Shameful!! Absolutely pathetic.”

Workers at American Airlines should follow the lead of their brothers and sisters at Alaska and vote NO on the tentative agreement, which would bind them to years more of eroding real pay and deteriorating working conditions.

At Alaska and American, as well as United (where a strike vote is underway) and Delta, flight attendants should organize rank-and-file committees, democratic organizations led and controlled by workers. Such committees would enable workers to effectively communicate with each other and coordinate their strategy across companies and draw up a list of demands based on what flight attendants actually need.

The APFA’s deal would put flight attendants at \$35.82 per hour (plus average boarding pay of \$2.94) which is barely higher pay than the non-unionized Delta flight attendants, who are receiving \$35.50 per hour (with \$2.91 boarding pay). The aviation industry often works like this, with workers at one airline setting the benchmark for contract struggles in other airlines, most times serving to depress pay rather than increase it.

Significantly, union bureaucrats will receive 115 hours of “trip removal pay” under the TA and can actually work some trips too, gaining many more hours logged for back pay than a rank-and-file flight attendant could have done. These bureaucrats will receive at least \$33,000 in their checks.

401(k) contributions and matching will go up by 2 percentage points for company contributions and 1.5 percentage points for company matching. 401(k) plans have long been a ruling class scheme to tie workers’ retirement funds to the stock market, rather than providing defined benefit pensions, meaning many workers are left with virtually no income when they retire.

The reserve system was also not improved. Creating a financial incentive to not schedule as many crew members to work reserve by making American pay a premium wage for these shifts would allow more workers to keep their precious days off instead of picking up required trips.

The TA would limit the ability of flight attendants to transfer work locations since it allows for out-of-base flight attendants to pick up trips and thus reduces the incentive for the company to allow transfers to understaffed bases since they would now have a “systemwide open time pool.”

Significantly, the contract does not include a return to pre-pandemic staffing levels for long-haul widebody aircraft. American Airlines continues on with reduced staffing, which started early in the pandemic when passenger numbers plummeted, despite those numbers having since returned to pre-pandemic numbers.

Last fall, American Airlines flight attendants voted to authorize a strike by a vote of 99.47 percent after having been kept on the job with no raises since January 1, 2020. The company justified this under the pretext of hardship from the pandemic, and the APFA bureaucracy did nothing to challenge

it. In the meantime, flight attendants faced insulting and dangerous working conditions, including deaths and mass infection from COVID-19 and poisoning by toxic uniforms.

The APFA bureaucracy used the provisions of the anti-worker Railway Labor Act (RLA), as the the Transport Workers Union did with flight attendants at Southwest and the AFA did at United, to deny American Airlines workers their right to strike and tie them up in an unending cycle of pro-company mediation that can end in Congress and the White House imposing a previously-rejected contract on workers, as they did with railroad workers at the end of 2022.

Both American Airlines and APFA were aware that the union bureaucracy was not going to allow a strike to go forward under conditions of the US presidential elections. Not only will APFA not allow a strike to damage Harris’s chances at being elected President, but the union will also not allow a strike to damage the ruling class’s war plans.

Indeed, the Biden administration intervened in the American Airlines contract, working with the union bureaucracy to ensure a settlement was reached before a walkout took place. Biden hailed the announcement of the deal, stating, “I thank Acting Secretary Su, Secretary Buttigieg, and other members of my Administration for their efforts to help both sides secure this agreement, which averts a strike that would have been devastating for the industry and consumers.”

The union apparatus claimed it did not want to risk the interference of the National Mediation Board (NMB) if Trump were to once again gain office and appoint his own people to the NMB. But both capitalist parties have demonstrated that they are united in their determination to suppress and exploit the working class. Biden and Harris have already shown their commitment to use the reactionary RLA to deprive workers of their democratic rights and impose management’s terms.

This conspiracy between the union bureaucracy and the political establishment must be opposed by workers if they are to win their demands.

Workers should campaign for the rejection of the tentative agreement at American Airlines by the largest possible margin. To prepare a struggle against both American Airlines and the APFA apparatus, workers should organize rank-and-file committees, which will provide the means to link up across companies and work sectors in a fight for workers’ common interests.



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