

UPS temporarily grounds aircraft model involved in deadly Louisville crash

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12 November 2025

*On Sunday, November 16, at 3:00 p.m. US Eastern Time, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the Socialist Equality Party (US) are holding an online public meeting to organize the fight against layoffs and hunger. **Register here to attend.***

Following the horrific crash of its cargo plane in Louisville, Kentucky, UPS temporarily grounded its fleet of MD-11 aircraft. This model was involved in the disaster that killed at least 14 people, including three crew members. It accounts for about 9 percent of the UPS Airlines fleet, which comprises more than 500 planes.

The crash occurred on November 4 at Worldport, the main UPS hub in Louisville, at 5:15 p.m. local time. During takeoff, the left engine of the Honolulu-bound plane caught fire and immediately detached from the wing. The plane crashed in a dense industrial area near the Muhammad Ali International Airport, causing a huge fire. In addition to the 14 deaths, several people remain unaccounted for. The incident is the deadliest crash in UPS Airlines history.

Considering that the disaster took place in a large industrial area, it could have been even deadlier. Debris was strewn for nearly a mile from the crash site, and secondary fires affected nearby warehouses and storage lots. Kentucky Petroleum Recycling was directly hit by the plane. The business handles combustible and flammable materials, such as lubricating oil, hydraulic oil and diesel fuel.

On the grounding of MD-11s, the company said in a statement: “We made this decision proactively at the recommendation of the aircraft manufacturer.” They added: “Nothing is more important to us than the safety of our employees and the communities we serve.”

In fact, the grounding of the MD-11s is a reactive

measure aimed at controlling the public relations damage from the disaster.

The facts of the incident which are beginning to emerge expose the self-serving claim about their commitment to safety. Flight records suggest that the plane that crashed had been grounded in September to repair a cracked fuel tank. The plane underwent maintenance in San Antonio for more than a month until mid-October. Moreover, the plane was 34 years old. Cargo wide-body aircraft like the MD-11 have a typical service life of about 30 years.

The decision to continue flying this plane, even though it required extensive maintenance and was ready for retirement, was driven by UPS management’s need to squeeze every last bit of profit from its equipment and personnel. UPS still has 27 MD-11s in its fleet and plans to phase them out by 2032.

FedEx grounded its MD-11 planes on the same day as UPS did. FedEx has 28 MD-11s in operation out of a fleet of about 700. The only other US cargo airline that flies MD-11s is Western Global Airlines. Twelve of the company’s 16 MD-11s already have been put in storage. The company has not commented publicly on its plans for these aircraft.

The MD-11 was originally manufactured by McDonnell Douglas, which merged with Boeing in 1997. The following year, the company announced that it would phase out the MD-11 and that final deliveries would be made in 2000. Last week, Boeing “recommended to the three operators of the MD-11 Freighter that they suspend flight operations while additional engineering analysis is performed,” according to a statement on its website.

A day after UPS and FedEx grounded their MD-11s, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an emergency directive prohibiting flight for these planes

until all of them are properly inspected. The agency concluded that “the unsafe condition is likely to exist or develop in other products of the same type design.” It said that flights may resume after “all applicable corrective actions are performed.”

Like the UPS decision to ground the MD-11, the FAA’s order was reactive. It came too late to prevent the Louisville crash and the loss of lives. Moreover, the directive was issued during an ongoing government shutdown during which the FAA has furloughed about 25 percent of its 44,829 employees. The remaining workers are going without pay, including 13,294 air traffic controllers.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is investigating the crash. But like the FAA, the NTSB has furloughed about 25 percent of its roughly 100 workers.

More details about the crash and the plane involved will eventually emerge. But whatever new information the investigation uncovers, the fundamental cause of this disaster is the subordination of safety to the interests of profit.

The fact that the crash occurred during the longest government shutdown in US history underscores this fact. President Donald Trump is using the shutdown to wage a social counterrevolution, erasing gains that the working class has made over decades. He has usurped congressional power by pausing or withholding funds for federal programs and states. In one of the cruelest attacks, Trump has been withholding food stamp payments from 42 million Americans. This ruthless act is inflicting hunger upon millions of parents and young children.

At the same time, Trump has directed the U.S. Department of War to use “all available funds” to pay active-duty military personnel, who otherwise would not be paid during a shutdown. He is seeking to ensure the loyalty of the military, which is essential to his ongoing attempt to establish a dictatorship.

Trump is acting not as a power-mad individual but as the representative of the capitalist class. Facing unsustainable government debt and growing doubts about the US dollar’s role as the world currency, the corporate and financial oligarchy has no means of protecting its interests or maintaining its rule except through austerity, police repression and intensified exploitation of the working class. The ruling class sees

mass hunger and deadly plane crashes as acceptable costs for its further enrichment.

The working class is compelled to defend itself against this assault. The fight for jobs, adequate pay, transportation safety and all the necessities of modern life inevitably requires the fight for workers’ control and for socialism.



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