United Flight 169 strikes highway vehicle on landing at Newark: The latest incident in crisis-ridden US aviation system

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Do you work in aviation—as a controller, pilot, mechanic or ground crew member? Tell us about your working conditions using the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

United Flight 169 from Venice, Italy to Newark, New Jersey struck both a light pole and an 18-wheeler semi truck on the New Jersey Turnpike on May 3, during the aircraft's landing approach. The flight was traveling at approximately 160 miles per hour at the time of collision—well below its cruising speed of over 500 miles per hour—having slowed through the descent and landing sequence.

The Boeing 767 was landing on Runway 29 at Newark Liberty International Airport, which had become the active runway due to a shift in wind direction. Runway 29 is among the shorter runways at Newark, which means aircraft must hold their approach profile with greater precision, with landing gear extended as they cross the runway threshold at low altitude over the New Jersey Turnpike.

New Jersey State Police reported that the bottom of the aircraft's fuselage, as well as a landing gear tire, struck a light pole and a semi truck traveling on the turnpike before the plane completed its landing at Newark. CBS News reported that the truck driver was released from the hospital and was recovering at home from minor injuries as of May 4.

Both the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which is responsible for the operation and safety of the National Airspace System (NAS), were at Newark on Monday to speak with the flight crew and air traffic controllers.

The NTSB can take months or even years to reach final findings in cases of this complexity, where extraordinary accuracy is demanded and multiple contributing factors must be weighed.

But the turnpike corridor beneath Runway 29's approach path has alarmed motorists for many years. Aircraft on low approach appear startlingly close to highway traffic—though under normal conditions, they cross at altitudes sufficient to clear any vehicle on the road. Sunday's collision was not normal conditions.

The gusty westerly winds that prompted the switch to Runway 29 on May 3 created conditions capable of producing wind shear at low altitude—a sudden, dramatic reduction in the lift generated by the aircraft's wings that can cause the plane to drop rapidly below the established glide path. Pilots and controllers both have access to meteorological forecasts updated hourly, as well as real-time field conditions including wind direction, speed and peak gust readings. Onboard flight management systems and approach monitoring displays give both cockpit crew and controllers continuous glide path data. Audible warnings would have sounded seconds before the aircraft descended to an altitude that could bring it into contact with vehicles on the highway.

These warning systems existed. The question the NTSB will answer is why the approach was not aborted.

Rather than assigning blame to individual pilots or controllers, however, this collision must be understood as a product of the systemic crisis of American aviation. This is the predictable consequence of decades of profit-driven neglect of the public infrastructure on which millions of workers and travelers depend daily.

Air traffic controllers are working under conditions of historic under-staffing that has built up for decades. This is being compounded by a massive erosion of real wages due to inflation and skyrocketing costs of living in the urban areas, where FAA facilities are concentrated. As the WSWS has documented extensively, over 90 percent of US airport towers are short on air traffic personnel, and only about 70 percent of staffing targets are met by fully certified controllers at terminal approach facilities. The Philadelphia TRACON, which is responsible for Newark's airspace, has been, in the words of United Airlines' own CEO, "chronically understaffed for years."

The FAA's ground-based navigation infrastructure—radar arrays, VHF radio antennae, instrument landing systems—has languished in a semi-broken state for years. Budget appropriations have been consumed by competing contractors offering replacement systems that do not fully replicate the functions of the equipment they are meant to replace. The equipment failures at Newark in April 2025, when a burned-out

copper wire caused controllers to lose radar and communications contact with arriving and departing flights for 90 seconds, were a direct expression of this rot. That crisis has not been resolved.

The cuts by DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency, Elon Musk's semi-official group) imposed by the Trump administration have further shredded the support staff that sustains controllers' safety-critical functions, even as the acute shortage of certified controllers remains unaddressed. New hires require three to four years of training before full certification, a timeline no emergency pay incentive can compress.

Onto this already strained system falls the full weight of the US-Israeli war on Iran and the fuel crisis it has deliberately produced. The disruption of Persian Gulf oil flows drove jet fuel prices from roughly $90 per barrel to as high as $119 in the opening weeks of the war, a shock whose consequences now ripple through every corner of the airline industry.

This is not an act of nature. It is the direct, foreseeable consequence of a war of imperialist aggression prosecuted by the Trump administration in pursuit of control over oil and mineral resources, a war whose economic costs are being borne entirely by the working class.

Spirit Airlines, which ceased all operations on May 2, the day before this accident, is the first major casualty of this fuel crisis. Seventeen thousand Spirit workers lost their jobs and paychecks; their executives simultaneously sought $10.7 million in "retention" bonuses. After years of mounting financial losses, two Chapter 11 bankruptcy filings and a failed merger with JetBlue, the war-driven fuel price surge was the final blow that made Spirit's business model nonviable.

But in reality, Spirit was deliberately allowed to collapse by the government, in line with the decades-long consolidation in the industry under both parties. It is also an attempt to impose the costs of the war onto the backs of workers, both as producers and consumers—The immediate impact of the ultra-low cost carrier's demise was a sharp increase in ticket prices. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy claimed the government did not "have half a billion dollars laying around," while it is spending $1 billion a day on the war.

The collapse of Spirit Airlines is the beginning of a wave of cost-cutting across the industry. One of the most direct mechanisms through which this pressure reaches the cockpit is the go-around—the standard safety procedure in which a pilot aborts a landing that does not meet approach parameters, climbs away and re-enters the landing queue for another attempt.

But a go-around on a Boeing 767 burns over 4,400 pounds of jet fuel and costs the airline $2,000 to $3,000 in additional fuel and maintenance charges. Airlines are now training crews to minimize unnecessary go-arounds, and management reviews every decision that results in extra fuel burn.

Under normal safety conditions, the pilots of United 169, confronted with an approach that had dropped below safe parameters, whether from wind shear, a late wind gust or any other factor, would have executed a go-around as a matter of routine. The existence of systemic pressure, economic and institutional, to avoid that $3,000 cost cannot be separated from the question of why the approach continued to the point of collision.

This is the logic of capitalist cost-cutting applied to public safety infrastructure. The same logic led to the January 2025 collision between a passenger jet and military helicopter over Washington D.C. At Reagan National Airport's tower, one controller was left doing the work of two people. The same cost-cutting left Newark's approach systems running on burned-out copper wire.

The NTSB will eventually produce a factual record of what happened on the approach to Runway 29 on May 3. That record must be read within the political-economic context that made this incident possible—and that, absent a fundamental transformation of priorities, makes further incidents inevitable.

Aviation workers—controllers, pilots, ground crews and maintenance staff—face a common enemy in a system that treats their safety, their working conditions and their wages as variables to be optimized against the bottom line.

The answer is not to appeal to regulators, who have for decades refused to act, or to union bureaucracies like National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) that have extended punishing contracts without member consent and collaborated with management against the interests of workers. The answer is the independent organization of aviation workers in rank-and-file committees, united with workers across transportation and all other sectors, to fight for the public ownership and democratic control of aviation infrastructure as part of the broader struggle against capitalism and its wars.

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