

# United flight attendants vote on second contract, as Spirit collapse signals industry-wide crisis

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Voting closes Tuesday for a second tentative agreement (TA) covering 30,000 flight attendants at United Airlines. The vote by members of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA) is taking place under conditions of acute crisis in the airline industry, marked above all by the sudden collapse of Spirit Airlines on May 2 and the layoff of its 17,000 workers without notice or severance.

United flight attendants have not received a pay raise since 2020, though their previous contract became amendable in August 2021. They have been kept on the job through the joint operation of the airline and the union apparatus under the federal Railway Labor Act of 1926, which imposes heavy limits on the right to strike for railroad and airline workers. The law has been wielded for a century by the American bourgeoisie, and loyally enforced by the trade union bureaucracy, to suppress the class struggle.

Workers rejected the first tentative agreement last July by 71 percent on a 92 percent turnout. The current TA emerged after eight months of further mediated talks and was announced March 26 following a four-day session in Washington D.C. It runs from May 31, 2026 to May 31, 2031.

The United flight attendants' contract is far below what workers are demanding. The headline figure of \$100 per hour applies only to flight attendants in their 13th year of service or beyond and not until July 30, 2030.

One-time back pay equal to \$740 million is the equivalent of 4 percent of eligible earnings for

September through December 2021, 4 percent for 2022, 2023 and 2024, then 22 percent for 2025 and 25 percent for January through May 2026. For example, a flight attendant who earned \$60,000 in 2024 will receive \$2,400 for that year.

The agreement's much-publicized boarding pay applies only to a fixed period determined by the company rather than the actual time flight attendants spend boarding passengers. Moreover, this compensation is classified separately from regular wages, meaning it does not count toward vacation accrual and certain other benefit calculations. Compensation for long waits between flights ("sit time") is treated the same way.

The contract also leaves broad scheduling powers in United's hands. Restrictions on overnight "red-eye" assignments apply only within a narrow 2:00–4:00 a.m. window, while the airline retains the ability to schedule duty periods lasting up to 16 hours that include overnight flying.

In response to the second contract, many workers on social media have commented on their exhaustion with the whole process. "Right, I'm voting yes because I have to. It's nearly under duress. Strong word I know. But I literally cannot wait another year. I need to be able to afford my own place to live. On these wages that's just not possible."

Another commented that "[United CEO Scott] Kirby will say in his press release how proud United is for giving our FA the best industry leading contract ever! While the truth is that we voted yes out of sheer exhaustion. Yup, true."

Spirit's collapse is only the first casualty in a wave of bankruptcies and consolidations likely to break out

across the industry. The immediate trigger is the oil price shock due to the US attack on Iran. Jet fuel was roughly \$80 per barrel in March; by the week ending April 24, the International Air Transport Association recorded an average of \$179 per barrel. Industry analysts now predict JetBlue is highly likely to go bankrupt in the next year. Frontier is already returning aircraft and deferring deliveries.

But the oil shocks are being seized upon to carry out a further series of consolidations and job cuts. The Trump administration refused to bail out the airline, absurdly declaring the government did not have “half a billion dollars lying around.” Since the US airline industry was first deregulated in 1978, workers have been continuously under attack, especially through the mechanism of bankruptcies and mergers.

Only three “legacy” carriers—United, American and Delta—survive of the 10 major carriers from 1978. The legacy carriers are themselves preparing for further consolidation. United approached American Airlines about a merger earlier this year.

The situation demands that airline workers begin organizing now in defense of their jobs and the flying public against the next round of corporate attacks. The billions of dollars being squandered every week in criminal wars and the trillions of dollars controlled by Wall Street must be used instead to ensure a high quality, fully-staffed industry at affordable prices for the public.

Such a struggle requires a fight not only against management but the union bureaucrats who aid and abet this process. On May 5 the president of the Allied Pilots Association at American, Nick Silva, sent an email to American pilots praising United CEO Scott Kirby’s “bold vision” for a merger as “transformative.” The pilots’ union at American is openly fielding calls from Wall Street to back the merger, which would eliminate overlapping hubs and tens of thousands of jobs.

Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) International President Sara Nelson, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, is a more “left” talking union official, but this only serves as cover for collaboration with management. In 2020, Nelson helped secure \$54 billion in CARES Act payroll support for the airlines, which expired in October of that year and was followed immediately by tens of thousands of furloughs. In

2024, she actively backed the failed Spirit-JetBlue merger.

United flight attendants voted by 99.99 percent to authorize a strike in August 2024, but the AFA has invoked the Railway Labor Act in refusing to call one in the 20 months since, instead agreeing to nearly two years of mediation which has led to two unpopular deals. But even in the event of a strike, the AFA has said it would call a series of limited, rolling strikes rather than a national walkout. The bureaucracy treats this trademarked strategy, CHAOS or “Create Havoc Around Our System,” as virtually the equivalent of an economic guerrilla insurgency, but in reality it is designed to bleed workers’ initiative without challenging the airlines’ operations.

With Spirit now liquidated, Nelson did not respond by organizing a struggle but by sending a letter to Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and Acting Labor Secretary Keith Sonderling to request the Trump White House to “deploy the full capacity of the federal government to support [Spirit] workers.”

Whatever the outcome of Tuesday’s vote, mass layoffs are coming, the struggle is not over but entering its next phase. The defense of jobs across the industry requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the AFA bureaucracy and the two capitalist parties. New organs of power, accountable to workers and with no ties to management and Wall Street, must coordinate joint action across the industry.

In particular, airline workers must raise the demand that Spirit’s 17,000 workers must be made whole, financed by the expropriation of the war profits of the oil majors and the major banks. The Railway Labor Act must be abolished and the unconditional right to strike recognized. Such measures would be the first step towards bringing the airline industry under public ownership, under the control of workers, and operated as a public utility, not private profit.



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