

International Association of Machinists complicit in deregulation, subcontracting at Canada's airports that led to death of Oscar Robayo

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Oscar Robayo, a 39-year-old ramp agent at Montréal-Trudeau International Airport, was crushed to death during a routine pushback maneuver on an Airbus A350 late last month.

Federal and provincial authorities have launched investigations to determine what happened on the evening of August 24, as they are legally obliged to do. But they have said next to nothing about their findings, let alone suggested that corporate negligence played a role in Robayo's death.

Testimony from Robayo's former colleagues and other ground handling workers received by the *World Socialist Web Site* nonetheless points to one inescapable conclusion: The subcontractor SAMSIC ASSISTANCE Canada, which employed Robayo, systematically ignored elementary safety procedures. Worker reports indicate that Robayo did not have access to an adequate electrical extension cord that would have allowed him to maintain a safe distance from the plane's front landing gear, which crushed him. Moreover, this was part of a pattern, in which management cut corners and put undue pressure on staff, often reduced to skeleton crews, to meet departure times.

Federal government deregulates Canada's air transportation sector

Robayo's death was not an isolated event. It is the most tragic result of decades of deregulation, privatization and attacks on the working conditions of thousands of airport workers—a process overseen by federal governments since the 1980s. The privatization of Air Canada, the outsourcing of airport operations to “nonprofit” corporations in what amounted to semi-privatization during the 1990s, and the proliferation of subcontracting and contract-flipping for airport services are just some of the key stages in this onslaught on air travel workers' rights, which has been replicated in numerous countries around the world.

In Canada, the deregulation of air travel and gutting of worker rights has been facilitated by the entire trade union bureaucracy, including the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), of which Robayo was a member.

The race to the bottom in working conditions across the air travel industry to boost corporate profits orchestrated by governments and backed by the trade unions have made the airport sector one of the most dangerous for workers, particularly for those who work on the tarmac. In 2024, for example, the federal government reported that, with 21.41 accidents per million hours worked, air transport had the highest lost-time

injury frequency rate among the 16 sectors under federal jurisdiction. This rate was 15.40 in 2019. For 2024 alone, the government reported 4,793 disabling injuries and 9 deaths across the entire air transport sector.

The federal government bears a significant share of responsibility for Robayo's death, as it does for the thousands of workplace accidents that could easily be prevented each year. The government is directly involved in the management of many Canadian airports as “owner-lessor and regulator.” It has facilitated the proliferation of subcontracting and contract flipping over time, consciously knowing that this entailed job losses, wage reductions, high turnover through the replacement of experienced workers with less qualified personnel and declining health and safety standards.

The announcement this week that Prime Minister Mark Carney intends to privatize the country's four largest airports will only intensify the onslaught on worker rights.

In 2021, the federal Liberal government reformed Section 47.3 of the Canada Labour Code, ostensibly to guarantee that ground-handling workers would continue to receive the same pay rates when an airport subcontract changed hands. However, the Liberal government did not stipulate a new contractor had to match the benefits paid by its predecessor, and it conspicuously and deliberately avoided making the acceptance of seniority rights part of its “reform.” As a result, subcontractors could continue cutting costs at workers' expense by simply not rehiring high-seniority workers or rehiring workers under different job titles.

IAM and the entire union bureaucracy cover for the Liberals

The trade union bureaucracy has for years been well informed about and complicit in the terrible working conditions produced by the deregulation of the air travel industry, including subcontracting and contract flipping at airports. Not only IAM, but also Unifor, the Teamsters, the United Steelworkers and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) have extensively documented these problems in numerous submissions to the government and federal parliament.

In keeping with their defence of the collective bargaining system, and their corporatist partnership with the government and employers, the union bureaucrats limited themselves to issuing futile appeals to the government in power for better safety measures.

Far from seriously alerting and mobilizing their tens of thousands of

members across the country, the unions submitted to the dictates of the government and the airport corporations, hailing the limited and wholly inadequate amendments to the law (such as the 2021 amendment) that deliberately avoided addressing the fundamental problems affecting workers.

In the aftermath of Robayo's death, the IAM published a ceremonial text of barely 120 words that raised no questions whatsoever about the incident. The notice is still visible on the site, among the other "latest news," but it will soon disappear like a mere news item to be forgotten.

The union's indifference to the life of one of its members is not insignificant. If the IAM and its union allies are sweeping this affair under the rug, it is because they too bear a significant share of responsibility for Robayo's death. Moreover, the IAM insists that workers must await the outcome of the official inquiry into Robayo's death, i.e., an investigation overseen by the same state apparatus responsible for the deregulation of air travel and rampant growth of subcontracting.

As early as 2016-17, the IAM submitted a brief to the Emerson expert panel tasked with reviewing Canada's transportation system. The union took as an example a group of workers at Toronto's Pearson airport to show that they had experienced four contracts in nine years through successive subcontractor transfers. They detailed how workers could be rehired at minimum wage or close to it, and lose their seniority rights, medical insurance, vacation time and sick leave. The IAM argued that the constant turnover degraded productivity and the quality of services, drove experienced workers to leave their jobs and increased safety risks at the airports.

In 2018, the IAM headlined an article: "Contract flipping—The scourge of union existence at federal airports!" It traced the problem back to the 1990s and asserted that airport authorities used contract changes to reduce costs and "defeat the unions." The union repeatedly asked the government to apply to contract transfers the provisions of the Labour Code relating to successor rights in the case of the "sale of a business," but the government ignored these requests.

The IAM and other unions welcomed the Liberals' 2021 nominal guarantee for workers' remuneration after a contract flip. To the extent that they criticized the government for not including "successor rights" in its Labour Code reform, this was due to the Liberals' failure to protect union certification following a contract change, which undermined the ability of the union bureaucrats to collect union dues and build partnerships with new subcontractors.

The proof that the Liberals' reform had done nothing to halt the race to the bottom was not long in coming. In February 2023, Aéroports de Montréal granted new ground-handling licenses, including to SAMSIC. The French-based multinational expanded its operations rapidly in North America following the initial lockdowns at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered mass layoffs across the air travel industry. SAMSIC's business model was based on capturing contracts from existing providers by underbidding their labour costs and, if necessary, buying up competitors.

At the time, the IAM described the contract change to SAMSIC as "devastating" and declared that hundreds of jobs held by its members were being lost. The union's vice president, David Chartrand, complained of a loophole in the labour law and argued that contract flipping "dragged down working conditions in airports, favored anti-union practices, and undermined the quality of services as well as passenger safety."

The workers hired by SAMSIC did not initially have union representation. But in order to stabilize the company and stifle the anger of rank-and-file members, the IAM reached a collective agreement with SAMSIC in November 2024, which included a provision granting new hires union membership after three months. By August 2025, the IAM was lauding its "partnership" with SAMSIC management, including at a meet-and-greet event it held after the multinational succeeded in taking

over the Montreal operations of TSAS, a SAMSIC competitor.

IAM's political partnership with the NDP and support for the Liberal government

The unions' refusal to mobilize workers to demand better conditions and greater safety in the workplace goes hand in hand with their repeated betrayals of workers' struggles for more than 40 years.

The pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation of the trade union bureaucracy is expressed, among other things, through its close and longstanding ties between the IAM and the New Democratic Party (NDP). The Machinists' union was directly involved in the formation of the NDP in 1961, at a time when the party was advancing a reformist program. Over 60 years later, the social democratic party long ago abandoned its reformism, and has emerged, like its sister parties around the world, as fulsome supporters of imperialist war and capitalist austerity.

Between 2019 and early 2026, the NDP was decisive in securing the Liberals a parliamentary majority as they invested tens of billions in rearmament and waging the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, virtually abolished the right to strike, cracked down sharply on immigrants and enforced public spending cuts through the real-terms reduction of transfers to the provinces.

The IAM—like Unifor, the USW and the CLC—welcomed the 2022 confidence-and-supply agreement concluded by the NDP with Justin Trudeau's Liberal government. This agreement was formalized only one month after NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine began. The agreement laid the foundations for a major assault on the working class.

The IAM played a key role in presenting this reactionary agreement as a "progressive" bulwark against the Conservatives, when in reality it guaranteed a de facto majority to a government of austerity and war. The day after the agreement was signed, the IAM declared that the NDP and the Liberals had put "people above politics" and had finally focused "on delivering programs that will help working families."

In the following years, the government intervened repeatedly to criminalize strikes that threatened the profits of corporations and the financial elite, notably those of postal workers in 2024 and Air Canada flight attendants the following year. The flight attendants, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), were demanding an end to unpaid working hours on the ground, as well as wage increases in response to inflation. Less than 24 hours after the walkout began, the Liberal government intervened to make the strike illegal and imposed a contract through binding arbitration.

The issue of unpaid labour performed by air crews while on the ground is inseparable from the same process of deregulation in the air travel industry that created the conditions for Oscar Robayo's death.

Rank-and-file workers must reveal the truth about Oscar Robayo's death

The IAM union leaders did not push Robayo under the landing gear, to be sure. But their submission to the dictates of big business, their attachment to the framework of bourgeois labour laws, their defense of nationalism and their subordination to capitalist political parties are all factors that, in the final analysis, created the conditions for such a tragedy to occur.

Robayo's death will change nothing about the insecurity of the airport

sector as long as the industry remains in the hands of rapacious corporations, capitalist governments and servile union apparatuses. To ensure a rational and safe management of air transport, workers must unify and organize themselves into new forms of organization: rank-and-file committees led by and in the interests of workers, independent of the union apparatuses.

The development of rank-and-file committees must spearhead a broader, independent political mobilization of the entire working class against the capitalist profit system that is the source of exploitation and tragic workplace accidents.

For workers in the air travel industry, the most effective way to commemorate Robayo's life is to take control of the struggle for workplace safety and decent conditions out of the union bureaucrats' hands at Montreal Airport and across all airports in North America.

A rank-and-file committee of Montreal airport workers, both ground staff and air crew, could lay the basis for a genuine workers' inquiry into the death of Oscar Robayo, so that no relatives or work colleagues have to live through the horrific experience of what happened on August 24, 2026, again. The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) will do everything in their power to assist air travel workers in this fight.



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