United Airlines maintenance technicians vote to reject Teamsters-backed contract

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United mechanics: tell us why you voted down the contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

Airline maintenance technicians at United Airlines voted to reject a tentative agreement negotiated by the Teamsters on September 18, the second time in two years that workers have rejected terms supported by the union bureaucracy.

Of 10,629 eligible voters, 9,072 cast ballots, an 85.4 percent turnout. The agreement was defeated by 53.5 percent to 46.5 percent. The No vote came nearly two months after the Teamsters declared "victory" in securing what it called an "industry-leading" contract for more than 11,000 mechanics and related workers.

United mechanics are joining a series of rejections by aviation workers of sellout contracts. In July 2025, 71 percent of 28,000 United flight attendants voted down their own tentative agreement. At Boeing in September 2024, 33,000 machinists rejected a union-backed agreement by 94.6 percent and shut down most commercial aircraft production for seven weeks. Another 3,200 Boeing defense workers in the St. Louis area struck for 101 days in 2025 after rejecting successive offers.

On September 24, 350 Teamsters at aircraft-seat manufacturer Safran Seats in Gainesville, Texas, also went on strike after rejecting a contract containing mandatory overtime.

These struggles are bringing workers into increasingly direct conflict with the union bureaucracies. At United, the Teamsters bureaucracy is seeking to impose a settlement containing concessions after nearly two years of negotiations. Under Sean O'Brien, the Teamsters also blocked a national strike at UPS in 2023 and pushed through a contract that did not prevent accelerated automation, facility consolidation and the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs.

Details of the United agreement show that it was anything but industry-leading. Proposed wages still lagged behind competing airlines, while United included major concessions in contract language that undermined the value of the pay increases offered.

Base starting pay would have increased from $29.27 to $36.79 an hour, while the top base rate would have increased from $54.74 to $60.37. The proposed "all-in rate," including premiums such as night shift differential, increased top pay to $69.87, with the number of years to top rate reduced from eight to five.

Maintenance technicians on social media repeatedly criticized the pay being offered, with several demanding real "industry-leading pay" competing with UPS and FedEx, which offer a top rate closer to $75 an hour, and arguing that pay closer to $80 an hour would better reflect the value of their work. Significantly, UPS airline maintenance technicians are also represented by the Teamsters.

After the first year of the proposed contract, wage growth would have collapsed to just a few dollars over the next three years. The tentative agreement also did not make any provision for retroactive pay, despite negotiations dragging on for two years, which would have cost workers tens of thousands of dollars in time worked under the previous contract's pay rate.

United is perfectly capable of meeting workers' demands and more. The company posted profit of $3.4 billion in 2025 on revenues of $59.1 billion.

Despite United's large profits, the company sought to offset wage increases with corresponding attacks on benefits and working conditions. A union memo shared by airline mechanics on social media outlining the pros and cons of the agreement listed just eight pros to 16 cons. The contract retained the tier system for worker retirement plans.

The contract also reportedly weakened language restricting the ability of the company to outsource work and opened the door to some work being performed by employees without Airframe and Powerplant licenses, the federal certification held by aircraft mechanics responsible for maintaining, inspecting and signing off on aircraft.

That such an indictment of the contract would be shared by the union itself is an indication that the Teamsters knew there would be substantial opposition. Even the bargaining committee voted only 19-12 to recommend it.

Mechanics had been voicing that opposition for weeks. In discussions on the aviation maintenance subreddit, commenters identifying themselves as United mechanics attacked the lack of retroactive pay, weak long-term raises and concessions on scope. "Non-A&Ps anywhere should be an immediate no," one wrote. Another said the agreement would have meant a large raise for him personally, “but too bad it was garbage outside the progression cut.”

The age of workers may also be a factor in the growing spirit of resistance. Census Bureau data show a substantial younger layer of airline mechanics alongside the older workforce. For workers with decades of employment ahead of them, long-term wage growth, benefits and contract language carry consequences far beyond a one-time signing bonus.

The resistance is developing as the airline industry enters a new period of restructuring. War in the Middle East has sent oil and refined fuel prices sharply higher. IATA projects jet fuel will average $152 a barrel in 2026, nearly 70 percent above 2025, while global airline profits fall from $45 billion to $23 billion.

Airline managements are using the fuel shock to accelerate measures aimed at defending profits at the expense of workers and passengers. United, American and Southwest have begun cutting planned schedules, while higher costs are being passed on through increased fares. Spirit Airlines, weakened by debt and repeated bankruptcy proceedings, ceased operations in May, eliminating thousands of jobs and removing a major low-cost competitor.

The same profit requirements are driving the offensive on labor costs. Airline mechanics are in short supply and are an aging workforce in an industry desperate to minimize costs on aircraft maintenance. United’s demand for greater freedom to outsource maintenance comes as airlines are being forced to keep older aircraft in service because manufacturers cannot supply enough replacements.

IATA says the aircraft order backlog exceeds 18,000 and the average global fleet age has reached 15.2 years. Older planes require more work, and supply-chain failures added an estimated $3.1 billion to airline maintenance costs in 2025.

Many airline mechanics work extensive overtime and long shifts under high pressure to conduct maintenance and repairs quickly in order to maximize operational time per aircraft and therefore profit for the airlines. These conditions increase the airlines’ dependence on skilled mechanics even as management seeks to reduce the cost of their labor and expand outsourcing.

The consequences of subordinating safety and quality to production and profit targets have already been demonstrated at Boeing. Two 737 MAX crashes in 2018 and 2019 killed 346 people. Boeing admitted in a 2021 deferred prosecution agreement to conspiring to defraud the United States over information supplied to the Federal Aviation Administration about the MAX.

The broader aviation system is also being strained by chronic understaffing and cost-cutting. The FAA has roughly 11,000 certified air traffic controllers, who averaged 167 hours of overtime in 2024. On August 24, 39-year-old ramp worker Oscar Robayo, employed by ground-handling contractor Samsic Assistance Canada, was crushed by the nose gear of a French Bee Airbus A350 during a routine pushback at Montréal-Trudeau International Airport. Co-workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had been forced to conduct the operation without an extension cable that would have allowed him to remain a safe distance from the aircraft.

After rejecting the contract, United mechanics must now go through the arduous process imposed by the Railway Labor Act, which governs labor relations in both the railroad and airline industries. The RLA requires workers to go through bargaining and federal mediation before they can legally strike. Further procedures and presidential intervention can delay strike action again.

Railroad workers saw how this machinery could be used in 2022. After years of negotiations and federal mediation, workers were poised to launch a national strike when the rail unions blocked strike action and set the stage for the Biden administration and Congress to intervene. Congress passed legislation making the unratified agreement binding, and Biden signed it on December 2, 2022.

The Teamsters bureaucracy does nothing to break workers free from the constraints of the RLA. The United mechanics’ rejection now threatens to be channeled into another prolonged round of bargaining and potentially federal mediation while pressure builds for a revised settlement.

Frustration is growing with the Teamsters among United mechanics, with some calling for replacing the Teamsters with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association. But the fundamental issues they and other airline mechanics are facing cannot be solved with a simple change of one set of union bureaucrats for another. The basic issue is the union bureaucracy itself, joined at the hip with management and the corporate parties.

The interests of airline mechanics and all airline workers can only be advanced through the independent struggle of rank-and-file workers to unite workers, regardless of company or craft, in a common fight for better pay, working conditions and benefits.

The next stage of the struggle is for workers to form rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucracy. These committees would allow workers themselves to discuss demands, prevent the rejected concessions from being repackaged and establish direct links with flight attendants, Boeing workers and other sections of the aviation workforce.

Rank-and-file committees at United should oppose further erosion of licensed and in-house maintenance work, demand substantial wage increases and full compensation for the two years spent without a new agreement, and prepare common action across crafts and companies.