

Canadian pilot speaks out on deregulation and speed-up following the death of Montreal airport ramp worker Oscar Robayo

Felix Gauthier, Jake Silver
5 October 2026

Are you an aviation industry worker ready to support the building of a rank-and-file committee to launch a fight back against the systematic deregulation of the industry carried out by governments and corporations, and supported by the trade union bureaucracies over the past four decades? Fill out the form at the end of this article to contact us and speak out about your own experiences.

The death of ramp worker Oscar Robayo at Montréal-Trudeau Airport in late August was the product of systematic deregulation and profiteering across the air travel sector. The 39-year-old was crushed to death by an Airbus passenger jet while performing a routine pushback operation for which his employer, the subcontractor Samsic, failed to follow appropriate safety procedures, according to numerous worker testimonies given to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The semi-privatization of Canada's airports in the 1990s facilitated the growth of a highly competitive race to the bottom between subcontractors providing ground handling services and other operations at airports. Government deregulation allowed competitors to underbid existing providers by cutting labour costs in a process referred to as "contract flipping," resulting in ever greater pressure to cut corners and ignore safety rules.

Montreal Airport provides a clear example of this. It was there in 2023 that Samsic, a multinational provider of "business services" employing over 100,000 people in 27 countries, secured the contract for ground handling services following a "contract flip" that abrogated existing workers' seniority rights and benefits.

Interviews by current and former employees at Montreal Airport with the WSWs show that workers complained for years prior to Robayo's death about the cavalier attitude towards safety shown by Samsic, and the subcontractor's expectation that workers use broken equipment and violate long-established safety procedures.

Robayo was crushed because he was forced to stand next to the landing gear of the passenger jet, a violation of standard operating procedure, due to the absence of an extension cable that would have allowed him to communicate with the pilot from a safe distance.

A retired pilot, John, recently spoke to the WSWs about the transformation of the aviation industry he witnessed over three decades during his career.

John began flying commercially in 1978, just as the US government under Democratic President Jimmy Carter began the deregulation of the aviation industry. Deregulation was intensified dramatically in 1981 when Reagan fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers to break their union, PATCO.

In Canada, Air Canada was privatized in the late 1980s and by the 1990s the major airlines were permitted to break themselves into smaller carriers, and the regional airlines that resulted became a low-wage dumping ground.

"Air Canada established a regional airline by buying up smaller ones," John recalled, describing how his own employer, Time Air, was absorbed into Canadian Regional. "The rules and the flight time were noticeably harder than at the major airlines."

The speed-up was immediate and open. On the Shorts 360 turboprop he first flew, the legs were so short that crews performed 14 takeoffs and landings a day. While the average schedule was 12 days, pilots on the short-haul routes worked 16 to 18 days for the same money. "It wasn't hidden; it was just obvious," he said.

The consolidation of the regionals into a single Air Canada subsidiary in the 2000s was, in John's account, a cost-cutting exercise dressed up as restructuring. Seniority lists were scrambled, pushing out the highest-paid pilots near retirement, and crew complements were pared to the legal minimum.

"They changed the rules: on a 37-seat aircraft, one flight attendant; at 38 seats, you had to have two. So they kept it at 37 passengers and one attendant." The result, he said, was fewer workers, longer hours and lower wages, "which is basically what deregulation does."

Despite extensive training and experience, pilots faced dire conditions: "It took a long time for a pilot starting at regional level to actually make a decent salary. I can remember driving cab on my days off just to pay the rent. That was kind of the price to get into the industry at that level."

The defining feature of the job, John explained, was the

relentless pressures of a schedule determined by constantly shifting market competition—a pressure that flowed directly from the airlines’ need to keep aircraft in the air and generating revenue. “The delays are cumulative,” he explained. A half-hour delay in Victoria meant a late arrival in Winnipeg, which cascaded down the line. “You always had to be on time, or even slightly early, to make that critical departure time.”

Without constant coordination with ground staff and air traffic control, a crew could lose its departure slot and fall behind. “We’d be constantly talking with ground staff and air traffic control for a departure time, and it just got really, really tough.”

It was precisely this pressure—the compression of schedules to maximize aircraft utilization and profit—that contributed to the death of Oscar Robayo. The jet on which he was performing the pushback had been delayed in Montreal over the previous weekend due to a technical problem and was already one-and-a-half hours late for its departure to Paris on the day of the fatal accident.

The industry’s culture, John said, discourages pilots from admitting when they are unfit to fly. “There’s a ‘we can do anything’ mentality—we don’t need sleep, we don’t need food—that World War II mentality. It’s ridiculous.” But when a pilot does develop a medical problem, “There’s no support, no way to proactively deal with it.”

The individual worker is invariably made to pay the toll with their physical and mental health, and they are made to carry all the responsibility and guilt for safety.

John pointed to the case of Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, who landed his crippled plane in the Hudson River. “Immediately they said it was his fault and tried to crucify him, and of course it was proven afterwards that was really the only thing he could have done,” he added.

John believes that there is a growing awareness among workers that their conditions are not a local accident but produced by a global system of deregulation and profit maximization. “They can see the guys in Australia have the same problems as the guys in Germany, the same problems as the guys in Canada, the same problems as the working class in the States,” he remarked.

In its articles following the death of Oscar Robayo, the WSWs has insisted that improvements to dangerous working conditions and the prevention of future deaths can only be achieved if workers organize independently of the union bureaucracies that have facilitated deregulation and blocked workers from launching a counteroffensive over decades.

At Montreal, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), of which Robayo was a member, lauded its partnership with Samsic management as recently as August 2025 and released a token news release following Oscar’s death that failed even to mention him by name.

Aviation workers need to build rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the workers themselves, to take up

the demands of the rank and file and mobilize the industrial and political power of the working class against deregulation and corporate profiteering, and for workers’ control over workplace safety and the aviation industry.

“Rank-and-file committees are probably the best way to outflank the unions, to be completely independent of all the vested interests,” John said in agreement. He described the camaraderie and pride in craft he saw in the crew rooms—qualities that management exploits but that also point the way forward.

“The fight against the current—we’re not going to speed up, that’s it. It’s bad enough as it is. Pushing back—the shop floor is the place to do it,” he said.

Crucially, John insisted, this fight must be political, “Getting workers involved in seeing the political aspect of it, developing that political understanding most of us don’t have when we’re working, I think that’s an excellent way to go.”

This sentiment could hardly be more timely under conditions in which the Carney Liberal government announced plans to privatize Canada’s four main airports to increase the opportunities for the financial oligarchy to extract profits from the aviation sector.

The privatization initiative is part of the ruling elite’s class war agenda to subordinate all of society’s resources to enriching the financial oligarchy and mobilizing Canadian imperialism to wage war around the world.

A key mechanism for the enforcement of Carney’s program is the effective banning of the right to strike, a threat that will be familiar to thousands of airline workers at Air Canada and Westjet who have been on the receiving end of government-imposed strike bans over recent years.

We strongly urge all workers who agree with the urgency of a rank-and-file mobilization to fight for good-paying, secure jobs, safe workplaces and an end to capitalist deregulation and austerity to fill out the form below to get involved.

Help build an aviation workers rank-and-file committee to coordinate an industrial and political mobilization of the working class and conduct a workers’ inquiry into Oscar Robayo’s death that will get to the bottom of the conditions behind it and explain what must be done to prevent a repeat of this tragedy.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact