

Spate of workplace fatalities exposes the disastrous consequences of airline deregulation in the US and Canada

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The Aviation Workers Rank-and-File Committee is conducting an independent workers' inquiry into the death at Montreal Trudeau International Airport of ramp agent Oscar Robayo, who was crushed to death while performing a routine pushback on a passenger jet.

Do you want to share your experiences of dangerous working conditions in the airline industry or provide expert testimony to the inquiry? Contact the Committee at aviationworkersrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article.

Nearly fifty years after Democratic president Jimmy Carter signed the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, a series of aviation industry fatalities demonstrates the viciousness of the onslaught by the ruling class on working conditions that it unleashed.

Two recent fatal accidents in particular highlight the crumbling aviation system and the erosion of safety in the industry.

On September 6, 21 Air Flight 7598, a cargo carrier operating on Amazon's behalf under the Amazon Air brand, overshot Runway 30 at Miami International Airport in Florida. The aircraft, a 32-year-old Boeing 767-300 freighter, demolished a Ford Econoline van carrying seven aircraft-cleaning contractors on airport property before smashing through the airport fence, striking a Toyota Corolla Cross on Northwest 67th Avenue and breaking through another fence near a fleet of Tesla robotaxis before finally coming to a halt.

Five of the workers were killed: Rolando Aleman Leon, 55; Yoel Rodriguez Naranjo, 53; Julio C. Pineda, 75; Carlos Acosta Fajardo, 53; and Javierkys Reyes Quevedo, 47. That Pineda was 75 years old and still working as an aircraft cleaner on the tarmac is, by itself, a devastating indictment of the capitalist system.

At Montréal-Trudeau International Airport (YUL), Oscar Robayo, a 39-year-old ground handling worker was killed on August 24. He was crushed to death during tractor push-back by the landing gear of a French bee Airbus A350-900, a massive wide-body jet with a maximum takeoff weight of 280 metric tons.

Both of these fatal accidents occurred due to similar factors. Each involved the practice of airlines and airports subcontracting work to the lowest-bidding companies. Subcontracting acts to depress wages and put a layer of plausible deniability between the major company and the daily operation. Amazon's entire business model is built on legal separation from the workforce that moves its cargo—pilots employed by Atlas Air and Air Transport International, and cleaners employed by Professional Ocean Service Corporation.

The accidents were also entirely preventable, since the money that could have been spent for life-saving equipment and training was saved by these companies at the cost of lives. Each life ended was that of low-paid least-protected contract workers, who are overwhelmingly immigrants.

The fatalities in Miami could have been prevented with the installation

of the Engineered Materials Arresting System (EMAS), which is a lightweight, crushable concrete block system installed at runway ends to prevent this exact catastrophe from happening. It has been installed at 122 runway ends at 70 airports so far, but is not installed at Miami.

Oscar's death was the result of his employer, the multinational Samsic, not providing him with an extension cord for his headset, forcing him to walk dangerously close to the nose gear as the aircraft was towed. The headset is used to communicate with the pilot and is connected to the airplane as it is being pushed back by a tractor designed for the purpose.

Worker testimonies obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site* since Oscar's death confirm that Samsic has repeatedly violated safety procedures and compelled workers to use broken equipment since it took over ground handling operations in 2023.

There is only one reason for the fatal lack of the safety equipment that would have prevented these tragedies: profit. The airlines and airport operators factor human lives into their balance sheets, finding a certain number of periodic worker deaths acceptable compared to the costs of proper safety equipment. These calculations are facilitated by systematic government deregulation and the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy in this process through its corporatist partnerships with corporate bosses and government ministers.

Airline deregulation and the class war on workers

In both Canada and the US, the airline industry is supposedly regulated by the federal government. But in Washington and Ottawa, the principal concern is to maximize corporate profitability.

The situation today mirrors the aviation industry in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Anarchy in the market and the subordination of production to profit created very unsafe conditions both for workers and travelers. Airlines at the time cut ticket prices below operating costs, which meant cutting corners on safety, and many airlines went bankrupt.

A string of high-profile plane crashes severely damaged public confidence in air travel, including the 1931 TWA crash which occurred in Kansas, killing everyone aboard—including beloved Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne.

The upsurge of the class struggle in the 1930s—the insurgency of workers that established the mass industrial unions of the CIO, a series of general strikes in US cities—forced the airlines and the federal government to give the concession to create centralized oversight over the industry to maintain stricter safety standards. Ticket prices were regulated, allowing

airlines a modest profit while restraining the cutthroat competition of the past.

In the US, the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938 was passed as a result, creating the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), which regulated ticket prices and routes, and the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), the predecessor of the FAA, which took over the physical skies. It assumed responsibility for air traffic control from the airlines, pilot certification, and safety systems.

In the capitalist system, these safety controls can only last so long before being overridden by the relentless profit motive. On October 24, 1978, following the demands of airline CEOs who chafed at regulated profit margins, President Jimmy Carter signed the Airline Deregulation Act into law. This law removed federal government regulation of domestic airfares, routes, and the creation of new airlines. It abolished the CAB, which officially dissolved in 1984, while leaving the FAA solely in charge of aviation safety.

To enforce this, the ruling class had to smash the opposition of the working class. In 1981, US President Ronald Reagan fired all 11,000 striking air traffic controllers and broke their union, PATCO. This was the opening shot in a sweeping wave of deregulation and union busting throughout industry and across national borders.

The trade unions, which had in a previous period secured limited gains for airline and other workers through militant struggles within the framework of nationally regulated capitalist economies, were transformed into appendages of the corporations and governments, who took advantage of the globalization of production to intensify the exploitation of the working class and gut workplace regulation in the name of corporate “competitiveness.”

Airline deregulation in the US was followed by the privatization of state flag carriers—Air Canada (1988), British Airways (1987), and across Europe—and by the liberalization of European and international aviation through the “single market” and open-skies agreements.

The initial impact was a lowering of ticket prices, but workers paid for this with more dangerous working conditions and massive speedup. Airlines, now in control of their own routes, adopted the “hub and spoke” routing system that cut costs for large airlines, but simultaneously put more stress on air traffic control at those hubs and at the Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCCs) that handled high altitude flights between airports. Tower controllers at hub airports now had many more operations per day than before, and ARTCC controllers had complicated routes to separate.

Airline deregulation also led to industry turmoil as the exact same process of cutthroat competition began again. Many airlines went bankrupt, were liquidated, or were purchased by other airlines, leading to massive airline consolidation over the following decades. The Air France-KLM merger of 2003 was explicitly a “response to deregulation,” and 2001 alone saw the collapse of Swissair, Sabena, Canada 3000, and Australia’s Ansett. Even air traffic control was privatized—Germany moved to sell off 74.9 percent of its ATC in 2005.

Canada’s air traffic control system was privatized in 1996. Canada also semi-privatized its airports through nominally nonprofit airport authorities in the 1990s. These changes facilitated the proliferation of subcontracting and “contract flipping” under the Canada Labour Code.

The 2021 “reform” of the Labour Code, touted by the Liberal government as necessary to guarantee that the same wages would be paid by a new subcontractor following a “contract flip,” deliberately left out seniority rights so subcontractors could keep cutting labour costs and paying lower wages in practice. Samsic was one of the leading beneficiaries of this decision as it rapidly expanded its operations in North America by rehiring laid-off workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

Samsic is a French multinational with over 100,000 employees; its

competitors—Swissport, Menzies, and the rest—are global ground-handling giants that compete precisely by underbidding on labor costs. They achieve this either by hiring new and inexperienced workers or by cutting corners on safety and standard operating procedures.

The trade union bureaucracies in every country have sanctioned the deregulation of the aviation industry by partnering with governments, airline management, and the ruthless subcontractors like Samsic who squeeze every last drop of profit out of ground handling and other service workers.

In Canada, unions like Unifor, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and Canadian Union of Public Employees have long records of lauding the Liberals as a “worker-friendly” and “progressive” governing party, even as they have helped accelerate deregulation and now plan to privatize Canada’s airports outright.

In November 2024, the IAM concluded a collective agreement at Montreal Airport with Samsic, the ground contractor Robayo worked for. It included a provision granting new hires union membership only after three months on the job. By August 2025, the IAM organized a public event to celebrate its cooperation with Samsic management as it took over the Montreal operations of ATS, another competitor. After Oscar’s death, the IAM published a 120-word notice that raised no questions about his death and labelled it a “tragic accident.”

The union bureaucrats did not directly crush Robayo under the landing gear, but their submission to the employers, their attachment to bourgeois labor law, and their subordination to capitalist parties created the conditions that killed him. The IAM now wants to leave it up to the federal Transportation Safety Board (TSB) and Quebec’s CNESST, the provincial regulator for workplace safety, to determine what went wrong August 24.

When fatal workplace incidents like Robayo’s occur, government safety agencies invariably side with the large corporation.

Sometimes a nominal fine is slapped on the airline, such as when OSHA fined Piedmont Airlines \$15,625, the *maximum penalty allowed by law*, for failure to provide a hazard-free workplace in the December 31, 2022, death of Courtney Edwards, a 34-year-old mother of three who worked as a ramp agent when she walked in front of a running jet engine and was tragically ingested.

The US National Transportation Safety Board reached the opposite conclusion from OSHA, issuing a preliminary report noting that Edwards had breached safety protocols and caused her own death. The OSHA fine was simply a rounding error for a company with \$12.2 billion in quarterly revenue. Piedmont is a wholly owned subsidiary of American Airlines Group Inc., which could absorb the fine without having to change its safety operation in the least.

Safety in the air and at airports is incompatible with the private ownership of the airline industry. The answer is not re-regulation but the building of independent rank-and-file committees of aviation workers, organized across company and union lines, fighting for safety as a class question and for the expropriation of the airlines from the capitalists who run them for profit.

It is this fight that the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is organizing across the air travel industry. No worker should ever accept being just a line expense in a corporation’s budget. Instead, they should organize to fight to place workplace safety under workers’ control and for political power to run the aviation industry and all key economic sectors in the interests of social need, not private profit.

The Aviation Workers Rank-and-File Committee is taking forward this fight by conducting an independent workers’ inquiry into the death of Oscar Robayo. If you are an aviation industry worker or expert who wishes to provide testimony or share your evidence, we strongly urge you to contact the AWRFC at aviationworkersrfc@gmail.com or fill out the

form below.



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