

American Airlines pilot union postpones contract vote citing better United Airlines offer

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The Allied Pilots Association (APA) announced Sunday that the union executive board had decided to postpone a vote on a new tentative in light of a better contract offer by United Airlines.

The union said a new contract proposed by American over the weekend increasing its pay offer still did not resolve “various quality-of-life and work-rule improvements that would bring us in line with our peers. Most of those items remain unaddressed in management’s most recent proposal.”

The APA, which bargains for over 15,000 American Airlines pilots, said in a memo sent out to American pilots on July 16 that the proposed pay rates and quality of life points in the proposed American agreement did not nearly match up with the United Airlines deal. “Management is fully aware that the proposed UAL [United Airlines] deal has now put the ratification of our TA in jeopardy.” The memo asked the company to “meet the new industry standards” if it expected American pilots to ratify an agreement.

“Surely AA [American Airlines] management cannot expect our pilots to accept an agreement that puts us behind our contemporaries at other airlines for at least the next four years,” APA said. An American Airlines spokesperson said the company will work with the union to make sure its pilots are taken care of.

“Pattern bargaining” is a system where an agreement with one company sets a standard that then is typically matched in subsequent negotiations across an industry. It has been used historically to divide workers and prevent a united struggle across an industry for what workers need.

United's current four-year deal would give pilots between 34.5 percent and 40 percent cumulative pay

raises as well as increased sick time, more standard days off, and restrictions on involuntary and standby assignments that the company uses to encourage pilots to become junior captains. These terms are themselves grossly inadequate to offset years of pay freezes under conditions of rampaging inflation while the airlines are making big profits.

An American Airlines spokesman expressed concern that United would outbid his company for qualified pilot's. According to American spokesperson Dennis Trajer the United contract compared with American's TA would create a 2 percent pay gap between their respective pilots as well as United offering better back pay provisions. United will offer more days off for junior pilots as well as more sick time than American's, Trajer added.

“Reality of the marketplace has changed,” Trajer said. The current contract deal as it stands “will not encourage new pilots to come to American.”

Pilots at Texas-based American Airlines are set to begin voting on the four-year deal on Monday, July 24. In the meantime, APA and American Airlines began re-negotiations on Tuesday, July 18 to meet the terms set by United.

“Our respective bargaining teams have committed to working around the clock beginning tonight for the next few days to address crucial improvements,” APA's Ed Sicher told pilots in Tuesday's memo.

In a separate memo Tuesday night, APA instructed pilots to be ready for “informational picketing” Monday night should talks break down.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, airline travel slowed to a trickle. Despite receiving billions of dollars from the CARES Act that was

supposed to be “exclusively used for the continuation of payment of employee wages, salaries, and benefits,” airlines scaled back operations, paused hiring, and laid off thousands of workers.

As a result of the premature ending of all COVID restrictions and public protections, air travel has begun to surge in 2023 and the resulting industry-wide pilot and crew shortage has had severe consequences, including pilot fatigue, endangering air safety.

The wages of Pilot and other airline worker have not kept up with inflation. Pilots and other crew have been forced to work longer hours and more onerous schedules. Sick leave has not adapted to a world where the ongoing pandemic can disable a worker for weeks and have repercussions in the form of Long COVID for months and years beyond. In order to maximize profits the airlines want to capitalize on surging demand by forcing workers to adopt unsafe and overly demanding schedules.

However, airline workers are in a powerful position if they join forces by other transport, logistics and industrial workers. The massive resurgence in the class struggle in the US and globally has seen strikes at levels unseen for many decades as anger reaches the boiling point for many sections of the working class.

Recently 7,400 Canadian dockworkers in British Columbia struck for wages that keep up with inflation as well as increased job protections in a struggle that puts them in direct political confrontation with shipping companies and the trade-union-backed Liberal government.

Tens of thousands of film and television workers are on strike for fair treatment and wages and 340,000 UPS workers are poised to strike on August 1. Meanwhile, 20,000 rail workers in England voted 91 percent to strike again as their contract dispute carries on since last June.

1,400 Wabtec locomotive manufacturing workers in Pennsylvania as well as 1,400 National Steel Car railcar production workers in Ontario are also continuing strikes.

To win their struggle pilots cannot leave the initiative in the hands of the pro management APA leadership. Like the railroad workers, airline workers right to strike is restricted by the onerous terms of the Railway Labor Act and pilots have been working under terms of an expired contract for years. Only all-out joint action by

all airline workers can win the right to adequate pay and safe working conditions.

Time and again the pilots unions have betrayed the fight for decent wages and safe working conditions. American pilots will recall that in 1993 when American flight attendants struck APA order pilots to cross picket lines. The same scenario took place during the last major airline strike in 2005, when pilots crossed the line of Northwest mechanics, resulting in the destruction of their union.

These experiences demonstrate that the fight at the airlines cannot be won if left in the hands of APA. Rank-and-file committees under the democratic control of the workers themselves must be formed to direct workers struggles, formulate demands, and organize the widest possible solidarity.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is working to assist workers in establishing these committees in every country and industry.



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