

# American Airlines flight attendants' contract talks end with no agreement, raising possibility of national strike

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*Are you a flight attendant at American, Alaskan, United Airlines or another carrier? Tell us what your working conditions are like and what you're demanding in the next contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Contract talks between American Airlines and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) end Thursday without reaching an agreement.

"After years of bargaining, including almost a year of mediated talks with the assistance of the National Mediation Board, and despite the Union's best efforts, American Airlines did not come to the table with an agreement that adequately compensates American's 28,000 Flight Attendants," said APFA National President Julie Hedrick. "Flight Attendants will move the process forward to secure overdue economic improvements.

American airlines released a statement as well on Thursday declaring an agreement was "within reach" and that it looked "forward to additional [talks] being scheduled."

Flight attendants at American are fighting for their first raise since January 1, 2019, when their last contract expired. They are also demanding retroactive pay for the period of delayed talks caused by the lockdowns in the early stages of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The end of talks takes the 28,000 flight attendants one step closer to a national strike. Flight attendants' right to strike is highly restricted under the Railway Labor Act, which also covers workers in the airline industry. The law, first signed in 1926 and amended in 1934 and 1936, mandates an extensive, byzantine mediation process designed to prevent workers from striking. Under conditions where workers' right to strike is severely limited and controlled by the pro-corporate government, this invariably results in contracts impose which are

favorable to the companies, as the law is designed to do.

In extreme cases, arbitration ends with work rules being imposed directly by Washington through a strike ban. This happened in the railroad industry in early December 2022 when self-described "pro-labor" President Joe Biden signed into law a dictatorial bill to impose a contract on rail workers which tens of thousands of railroad workers previously voted to reject.

The National Mediation Board (NMB), which has been overseeing negotiations between American Airlines and the APFA during this stage, has a flow chart that describes the process. According to this, American Airlines flight attendants could be on strike in 30 days, if allowed to do so by government mediators.

If the NMB declares an impasse and releases the APFA from mediation, it will next suggest voluntary binding arbitration. If either American Airlines or the APFA decline binding arbitration, a 30 day "cool-off" period will begin while flight attendants continue to work under the rules of the long-expired contract and are unable to take any work action like striking.

If an agreement is still not reached after the "cooling off" period ends, the parties could be sent back to mediation with the NMB to start a new cycle of negotiations. Another alternative, which happened with the railroad workers in 2022, is that the White House could appoint a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) to propose a contract. Only if neither of these steps are taken at the end of the 30 day "cooling off" period would flight attendants be allowed to go on strike. It is clear that the company and federal government will always intend to use the endless provisions of the pro-company RLA to not ever let that happen.

Even if a strike is allowed, the union does not have to call a strike immediately. In 2022, the railroad unions

stalled for months after being released from mandatory talks in September, giving Biden and Congress the time they needed to ban the strike before it took place.

The APFA has talked about targeting certain flights that might change daily rather than commit to an all-out strike. This would be similar to the bogus “standup strike” in the auto industry last year, which affected only a few plants and led to a contract which signed off on thousands of job cuts.

The APFA claims this is so most flight attendants will still get paychecks because the union lacks the funds in a strike fund to pay workers during a strike. The union has also told flight attendants to be prepared to miss credit card payments if they strike, an indication that the bureaucracy is prepared to starve out workers rather than provisioning them adequately for a struggle.

The union does not want to strike, is not prepared to strike, and is attempting to persuade their members it is in their interests not to go on strike. Killing a strike before it happens benefits management and the union bureaucracy’s cozy relationship with both management and politicians on Capitol Hill.

The situation has been created intentionally to show workers that it is in their best interests to capitulate to American Airlines management’s demands for austerity for workers and record profits for shareholders.

American Airlines management is well aware they can rely on the APFA bureaucracy to postpone strike action by enforcing the mediation stages of the RLA until either workers give up and accept a sell-out contract, or until one is imposed upon them.

There is an established pattern where airline unions drag out negotiations for years, wearing down workers’ resistance by accommodating endless management extensions and delays. A totally inadequate contract deal is eventually announced with a hasty vote called, where workers are only given contract “highlights” to make their decisions. If the agreement is voted down, it is simply repackaged during further negotiations until the pro-company deal can be rammed through the weakened resistance.

The last strike by any flight attendants in the United States was 31 years ago, in 1993, when American Airlines flight attendants struck for four days. Since then, pay and working conditions have continually worsened in the intervening years.

Instead of waging a united struggle for better pay and conditions, the airline unions have ensured that airline workers are separated from each other by job roles and

companies, laboring under work rules from separate contracts with staggered expiration dates. Likewise, the unions have kept airline workers separated from workers in other industries, including other transportation workers in other industries and parts of the world who share very similar conditions and struggles.

United Airlines and Alaska Airlines are also in negotiations for flight attendant contracts that are intentionally staggered to benefit airline management, with the lowest common denominator contract that is possible. They will attempt to drag out negotiations until American Airlines beats down their employees with the lowest contract they can manage to make workers accept.

United and Alaska will then take that contract as the new industry standard and either exceed it to show that they are “industry-leading” or attempt to undercut it using American’s “industry-leading” contract as an excuse. Either way, workers at all the airlines lose in this scenario.

The struggle at American Airlines will have repercussions throughout the industry. Flight attendants at American Airlines need to realize this and fight to unite across the industry with other workers for a common fight for adequate wages and working conditions.

Workers need to oppose this union-management-government conspiracy in order to win their demands. In order to wage this struggle, workers need their own organizations, under their own control where they have a democratic say in their own lives.

These organizations are called rank-and-file committees, where workers can discuss their issues in a democratic manner and plan their struggles. Rank-and-file committees must then wage the broadest struggle possible, uniting workers from different airlines, industries, and countries. Only by waging their struggles independently and united with other workers can they avoid betrayals by organizations with different interests from their own and win their demands.



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