

Pilots at Frontier Airlines vote to strike, posing need for joint struggle with Boeing workers

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On Tuesday, pilots at ultra-low cost carrier Frontier Airlines voted by 99 percent to authorize strike action, following 10 months of government-mandated mediation which failed to produce a new contract. The pilots are demanding pay and benefits on par with other airlines like Southwest and Delta, as well as an end to excessive hours and poor planning and security for assignments.

Last month, 4,000 flight attendants at Frontier also voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike.

The strike votes, the latest sign in growing opposition in the airline industry, comes as the strike by 33,000 Boeing workers continues into its fifth week. The workers are demanding a 40 percent pay increase and the restoration of pensions lost in a 2014 contract extension.

That strike has reached a crossroads. In an act of open retaliation, Boeing has announced plans to lay off 10 percent of its global workforce, or 17,000 people. It also plans to outlast the workers if necessary by raising \$25 billion in cash by selling off assets. This is on top of a \$10 billion loan it has already secured, a clear sign that the aircraft maker has the backing of Wall Street. Meanwhile, acting Labor Secretary Julie Su is intervening to shut the strike down, as she and the White House did to end a three-day strike on the East Coast and Gulf Coast docks earlier this week.

The votes at Frontier, however, show that conditions are emerging for Boeing strikers to appeal for broad

support in the working class, both in the airline industry and across the world. As the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee explained in a statement Wednesday, “The whole of corporate America is lining up behind Boeing; the working class must line up behind us.”

Opposition is growing to cost-cutting across the global airline industry. Last month, workers at Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer voted down a contract including benefit cuts and stagnant wages. They have not had a new agreement since 2017 and, like Boeing workers, have not had a pay raise in a decade. Airbus, Boeing’s European-based international rival, has announced 2,500 job cuts in its defense and space divisions, part of a wider series of cuts planned by the company.

And in August, flight attendants at Alaska Airlines overwhelmingly rejected a contract backed by the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA-CWA) union, which union officials falsely claimed to be a “historic” victory.

A unified struggle requires workers unite against the sellout union bureaucracies. The Boeing strike itself took place only when workers overwhelmingly rejected a sellout deal endorsed by the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Never having wanted a strike in the first place, the IAM is attempting to soften workers up on the picket line with \$250 a week in strike pay, while engaged in closed-door talks with Boeing and the White House.

AFA-CWA President Sara Nelson epitomizes the role played by the pseudo-left in propping up the pro-corporate bureaucracy. A leading member of the Democratic Socialists of America, her crowning achievement, in her own words, was working with

management to secure tens of billions in industry bailouts in 2020. “They handled the Republicans, and we handled the Democrats,” she told an audience at the 2022 *Labor Notes* conference.

The AFA routinely brags about its trademarked strike strategy known as CHAOS™, or Create Havoc Around Our System™, which it bills as keeping management “off-balance” through a series of limited, rolling job actions. In reality, this is a method to keep *workers* off balance with a series of toothless stunts, rather than a genuine fight involving a nationwide strike. For decades, since they were first started in the coal mines and other industries in the 1980s, limited or rolling strikes have been presented as tactical masterstrokes while paving the way in reality for massive cuts.

One of the most infamous recent examples was the “standup strike” by the United Auto Workers last year, which involved only a fraction of the US auto industry and did not seriously impact production. It was shut down with a contract, personally endorsed by President Biden, which is now being used to close plants and slash thousands of jobs, including nearly 2,500 layoffs begun at Stellantis’ Warren Truck plant near Detroit earlier this month.

Workers are also in a fight against the government and the two pro-corporate parties. While Republicans such as Trump, who compared autoworkers to children in a recent discussion with corporate executives, can barely conceal their contempt and hatred for workers, Democrats are utilizing the union bureaucracy to block strikes and impose sellouts.

Even though they voted overwhelmingly to strike, Frontier pilots are under the discipline of the Railway Labor Act (RLA), which imposes near-endless rounds of mandatory mediation, “cooling off periods” and other methods to block strikes. Frontier flight attendants, while also covered under the terms of the RLA, have been released from mandatory talks and can strike at any time since Frontier has refused to participate in mediated talks.

The White House and Congress used the RLA to block a national rail strike in 2022, finally outlawing a strike once the terms of the RLA were finally exhausted and workers rejected a government-backed agreement in a rank-and-file rebellion.

Su has been dispatched to reach an agreement to end the Boeing strike as she did to end the East Coast and

Gulf Coast docks strike this month. Far from a victory, that strike was ended on a 90-day extension, with no agreement reached on job protections against automation, the main demand from the workers. The railroad experience shows that, should rank-and-file determination make that impossible, the ruling class is fully prepared to use more open methods to break the strike.

But the power of the working class, if organized independently of the corporate parties and their allies in the union bureaucracy, can be brought to bear to defeat such attacks. This means the building of rank-and-file committees at Frontier, Embraer, Airbus and other major companies. Affiliated with the rank-and-file committee at Boeing through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), this would provide the means for workers to elaborate a common strategy, prepare joint actions and mobilize support for a common struggle.



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