

**United States Senate Committee on Health, Education  
Labor, & Pensions**

**Hearing on:**

**“Standing Up Against Corporate Greed: How Unions are  
Improving the Lives of Working Families”**

**Tuesday, November 14, 2023  
10:00 am EST**



**Testimony of**

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## **Introduction**

Thank you Chairman Sanders, Dr. Cassidy and members of the full Committee, for convening this hearing to examine how unions are improving the lives of working families.

My name is Sara Nelson. I am a twenty-seven year union flight attendant and president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA), representing flight attendants at 20 airlines across the industry along with our sister union the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, 80,000 flight attendants in total. We also coordinate closely with our partner union the Communications Workers of America, and all of the transportation union affiliates of the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO.

## **No matter the industry, the worker plight is the same**

It's an honor to testify beside my friends President O'Brien and President Fain, who both ran member-driven contract campaigns in recent months that are doing more to restore the American Dream than anything we've seen in decades. Flight Attendants and workers in every industry can relate to the demands of UPS and autoworkers, just as workers in every industry.

Workers are forced to fight battles that labor won decades earlier: over workplace safety, an eight-hour day, vacation, sick leave, a living wage, health care and retirement security. For too long, politicians and courts have sided with corporations over labor, fundamentally and perniciously reshaping American law, life and liberty. As union density declined to just six percent of the private sector workforce, our capitalist economy has unraveled the American dream. The social contract that has been in place since the 1940s, offering the working class a good life, the means to enjoy life in off hours, and a secure retirement if only one member of the family spent 40 hours on the job.

There are no red, blue, purple, green, or any other color states. Every state is a working class state. If we want a free society where everyone can thrive we need the kind of working class moral clarity with clear demands that came from the picket lines at UPS, the Big Three automakers, the writers, actors, healthcare workers, educators, hotel workers, grad students, grocery workers, mineworkers, farmworkers, confectionery workers, scientists, engineers, machinists, truck drivers, rail workers, tech workers, and aviation workers including Flight Attendants. America needs to support the rights of workers and the people do. More than ever before in our history the public understands this and finds common cause in fighting corporate greed and demanding shared prosperity and shared productivity as technology advances.

More than a century ago, in 1914, the great labor leader Mother Jones traveled to Ludlow, Colorado, where mineworkers had gone on strike when the company refused demands we take for granted today, like an eight-hour work day, enforcement of labor law and fair compensation.

The workers at the Ludlow mine were mostly immigrants, representing more than 30 nationalities, ethnicities and cultures.<sup>1</sup> There were 24 different languages spoken by the miners. In many cases, poverty and the cycle of exploitation in company towns forced young children into the mines. Coal barons ignored the state's safety laws, and the mines in Colorado were the most dangerous in the nation<sup>2</sup>, with more than twice as many deaths per capita as the national average. These workers had their backs against the wall, and when the bosses refused their demands, the workers walked off.

Before Mother Jones arrived, the private militia hired by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and the National Guard had opened fire on one of the camps. Reports vary, but at least 26 people were killed in the camps—including four women and eleven children who were suffocated by fires.

After that horrible massacre, Mother Jones gathered the miners together, and she said to them, "Sure you lost, because they had bayonets and all you had was the Constitution. Any battle between the Constitution and bayonets, the bayonets will win every time. But you must fight. You must fight and lose, you must fight and win, but above all, you must fight!"<sup>3</sup> The Ludlow Massacre and the Colorado Coalfield War that followed were a turning point in American history.

In Washington, Congress convened a United States Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR) and conducted hearings. That commission's report helped pave the way for Congress to enshrine the eight-hour workday, a ban on child labor, and eventually the Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Act.

For decades, working people fought. We didn't win every fight, but we were winning. We won pay and benefits that afforded us time to live our lives and retire with dignity. Starting in the workplace, we built political power and helped open the road for Civil Rights, for LGBTQ+ rights, for environmental protections and so much more. America's greatest days of shared prosperity and social progress were built on the foundations laid by generations of workers who fought for their rights at work, and all of our rights in our nation. And for decades, workers were winning.

But Mother Jones also warned us "The capitalists say there is no need of labor organizing but the fact that they themselves are continually organizing shows their real beliefs."

The tables fully turned when Ronald Reagan broke the PATCO strike and working people went into defense mode. Over the next 20 years, presidents and Congress gutted regulations that had protected workers and our country from the rapacious greed of a few. They deregulated the telecom industry, the trucking industry, and yes the airline industry. They opened "free trade" that gave corporations the freedom to ship jobs overseas and abandon American workers.

For nearly all of my adult life, the billionaires were increasing and amassing all the wealth - as a game of who can be the richest not who can contribute the most to society. They slowly chipped

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<sup>1</sup> <https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/diversity-then-now-ludlow-massacre-and-western-history>

<sup>2</sup> <https://books.google.com/books?id=vaWjBwAAQBAJ>

<sup>3</sup> <https://labortribune.com/mine-workers-roberts-brings-mother-jones-back-to-the-fight/>

away at our union contracts, convincing workers that we had to give back pay, benefits and working conditions just to keep our jobs. They created two-tier wage systems and shell games of sub-contractors. And they assaulted our democracy, flooding elections with corporate money and gutting the institutions and laws that made it possible for everyday Americans to thrive.

All of that happened because we failed to recognize the value of collective bargaining and the necessity of unions in our democracy and capitalist economy. After the violence workers suffered by company thugs while fighting to build up a society of shared prosperity, “labor peace” appeared to be a preferable course. But that led to corruption and compromise that often left workers unable to tell the difference between the corporate c-suite and the union leadership. Capitalism does not consider the people; it only pushes for higher profits at any cost. The only check for the people is unions and today the public understands this better than ever. We are starved for leadership that speaks with clarity for the working person, which today includes every gender, race, culture, and creed.

In Ludlow in 1914, as Rockefeller’s militia fired machine guns from fortified positions at the cloth tents where miners and their families were trying to shelter, the conductor of a passing freight train stopped the cars to block the bullets<sup>4</sup>. He gave the miners and their families a chance to flee to safety.

That spirit of solidarity lives on in the union leaders beside me. For decades, Teamsters have negotiated their contracts with “no scab” clauses so their members can refuse to drive delivery trucks across a picket line. Decades after Ludlow, it was the United Mineworkers who provided vital funding to help the UAW win its first campaigns<sup>5</sup>, and the contracts UAW negotiated over the years set the standard for all of labor. Today, everyone is a worker. As the president of the Flight Attendant union I am keenly aware of the gender pay gap associated with jobs designated as “women’s work,” “migrant work,” or jobs often filled by workers of color. Solidarity, safety, and security, demands we value all work and command dignity for the contributions of every worker.

Our country and our world face enormous dangers. But I have hope. For generations, workplace solidarity united workers across barriers of culture, language, belief and national origin. And in my lifetime, I have never seen the pull to solidarity more strongly than I do today.

### **September 11 Taught Me the Dangers of Crisis Capitalism, and the Value of Unions**

Amy King  
Michael Tarrou  
Amy Jarret  
Robert Fangman  
Kathryn LaBorie  
Al Marchand  
Alicia Titus

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<sup>4</sup> <https://libcom.org/article/ludlow-massacre-1914-sam-lowry>

<sup>5</sup> <https://afsc.org/news/legacy-united-mine-workers-america>

This was the crew of United Airlines flight 175. You know this flight. It's the one you can picture crashing into the South Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, because all cameras were trained on the site after American flight 11 hit the North Tower 17 minutes earlier. But this wasn't just any Flight Attendant crew - these were my friends, my flying partners, and members of my union. They were with pilot union members Captain Victor Saracini and First Officer Michael Horrocks. And the whole crew was so happy to have with them two Boston gate agents we adored. Marianne MacFarlane and Jesus Sanchez were using their flight benefits to take a well-deserved vacation, defined for them in their union contract.

I had been a Boston based union Flight Attendant for five years. I used to joke affectionately that "all gates lead to Jesus" as he would see us off and welcome us home again. I had worked flight 175 many times before, often with one of the two Amys; jokester and singer Michael; and Kathryn barely able to peek over the coordinator desk while on her tippy toes to reach the lead flight attendant paperwork. We had shared beers and "Fenway franks" at Red Sox games, day cruised on our annual union trip to Provincetown, dressed up and danced at our union holiday party, and celebrated Patriot's Day by gathering at Amy King's on Beacon Street to cheer on the Boston marathon runners. We had fought together through our union to get the airline to move us from a Los Angeles downtown layover hotel where there had been a rape, we protested and took a strike vote against a proposed merger with another airline and picketed as a part of a union campaign to get positions on the Boston-London flight we all wanted to work. We had just won federal certification for our work as Flight Attendants, a ban on spraying poisonous pesticides in our aircraft cabin, EPA oversight of our onboard water, FDA inspection of our airplane food, as well as fines and federal prison time for passengers who became violent or interfered with our work to keep everyone safe in the aircraft cabin.

Five years earlier when I became a Flight Attendant I only considered it because my union had won an epic battle against the tobacco industry to ban smoking from our planes. My college friend called me from a sunny layover at Miami beach to describe the real benefits of the job – pay higher than what would have been my first year as a teacher, free and expansive healthcare with coverage that mattered to women, flexibility with my schedule, and a pension that I could take as early as age 50. She didn't say it was the product of decades of fighting discrimination and building up a strong union contract, but that contract and the legal and legislative battles my union had won were what made me drive to Chicago the following day to interview to become a Flight Attendant.

I didn't know anything about unions when I got the job at United Airlines. After six weeks of training and three weeks working flights I couldn't wait to get that first paycheck. When it didn't come, I tried to get help from someone in the airport office, but the answer was, "we're sure you'll get it next time." Two and a half weeks later, on a diet of top ramen and plane food, rent was due and luckily so was the next payday. When the paycheck didn't hit my bank account again I was desperate for help, but the answers from the office were the same. I felt the tense anger in my chest and the hot tears welling up in my eyes. No one seemed to hear me or care. Then everything changed with a gentle hand on my shoulder. I turned around to see another

Flight Attendant I didn't know. She asked me how to spell my name, handed me a personal check, and told me, "first, you take care of yourself, and second, call our union!" I did call our union and I had my paycheck the next day, but that was also the hook for my involvement. That's how I knew Robert, Al, and Alicia, who had all only been flying for eight months before getting the last-minute call to work flight 175 on 9/11. I signed up to do the new hire union training to make sure new flight attendants knew their rights on the job and who had their backs if something went wrong.

Robert loved the career my union had built and told me he felt accepted and able to be who he truly was as a gay man for the first in his life, with benefits for his family no matter who he loved. Al took the job after more than two decades on the police force in New Mexico and was last seen by his wife Rebecca skipping down the terminal to work flight 175 after spending a romantic weekend with her on Cape Cod. The joy he felt for his second career was only possible because our union obliterated age and sex discrimination. Alicia was drawn to the job as an ambassador of peace, quickly beloved by the Flight Attendants throughout the base and fulfilled in the work of bringing people together, de-escalating conflict, and promoting what is also the strength of the union – solidarity among every gender, race, culture, generation, and creed.

In the crisis room at the Logan Airport Hilton our union set up tracking of every stranded crew and worked to get them home, while providing grief counseling and wellness checks that saved lives from suicide. We won several extensions of unemployment benefits for the thousands who were furloughed and expanded assistance for mental health challenges. Our union fought for federal security screening to stop airlines from relegating our security to the lowest bidder and forcing government agencies, airlines, and workers to ensure coordinated, redundant, and risk-based security was put in place. We fought for proper security training and tools on our planes, 100% screening of cargo, no knives allowed on our planes, and reinforced flight deck doors with secondary barriers. We planned memorial services and disaster relief for our friends' families. But while our union grieved, comforted, and reinforced our personal and national security, crisis capitalists were planning to redefine the value of our union jobs.

We lost over 100,000 aviation jobs practically overnight. Bankruptcies cut our pay, our staffing, shifted the cost of healthcare to us, and when \$80 million would have saved our Flight Attendant pension plan the court approved termination instead while at the same time awarding \$400 million to the top executives. There was no government bailout – but aviation workers were forced to give \$81 billion in concessions to "save" the airlines, much like auto workers were forced to give massive concessions to save Ford, Chrysler, and GM. The airline industry was heavily union, but after Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers in 1981 and even sent several to jail for the strike Corporate America knew it was open season on unions. The old union adage of "an injury to one is an injury to all" was replaced with a corporate narrative that you should feel lucky to have a job and solidarity was a song for suckers. The strike was made a dirty word and both unions and collective bargaining were under attack. Since union density has fallen to just 6 percent of the private sector, wages for the American worker have remained flat, while productivity has gone through the roof and straight to Wall Street.

Our experience in aviation is no different than for workers across the economy.

### **Unions are winning a better life for all workers**

Even at the height of the union movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, only one third of Americans were members of a union. But when enough workers are unionized, or when our wins are big enough, we set the standard for entire industries.

Within days of the UAW's tentative agreements with Ford, General Motors and Stellantis Group (the Big 3), Toyota announced that it will raise wages for workers in its US plants. Just last week, Honda announced raises across the board for US workers as well. Within an industry, if non-union firms want to attract and retain qualified workers, they must compete with the unionized workers' pay, benefits and working conditions. The more of us who are unionized, the more pressure all employers face.

Unions invest in workers' fights, even when we don't directly stand to gain. Just as coal miners invested in auto workers decades ago, in recent years teachers, nurses and public employees represented by the American Federation of Teachers gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to help Amazon workers organize and bargain. It was unions that put boots on the ground and resources into the campaigns that have raised the minimum wage across cities and states for tens of millions of workers.

I always tell people that a woman must join and run unions. That's because in our unions, we are equal. Whatever your gender, race, identity or religion, we all earn the same pay for the same job. We have a contract and representation to protect us from harassment and discrimination. Before any law protecting LGBTQ Americans in the workplace or extended same-sex partner benefits, union contracts did.

Unions keep corporate greed in check, in ways that benefit workers and consumers alike. A new study<sup>6</sup> from the Rady School of Management at the University of California San Diego found that stronger unions create a more stable economy. Companies where workers have a strong union make fewer risky bets and are less likely to take on dangerous debt, making them more resilient in downturns and reducing the risk of layoffs or full-scale collapses.

### **Workers First - No More Bogus Trickle Down "Relief"**

I had seen and felt the harm of crisis and bankruptcy before. When COVID hit our union was not about to sit back and allow it to destroy lives again.

During the pandemic, my union—alongside our Teamster siblings and the other aviation unions—fought for and won the historic workers' first relief program, the Payroll Support Program (PSP) originally part of the CARES Act. I would like to especially acknowledge

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<sup>6</sup> <https://today.ucsd.edu/story/unions-push-companies-to-reduce-risky-debt-help-safeguard-us-workers>

Chairman Sanders' role in helping pass this legislation, along with many other members of this committee, including Dr. Cassidy who worked to extend the program that saved our jobs and our industry.

Our Payroll Protection Program saved American aviation. The federal government provided grants to keep aviation workers on payroll during the greatest downturn our industry has ever seen.

PSP was designed with a single purpose: to keep aviation workers—passenger service agents, flight attendants, mechanics, caterers, pilots, dispatchers and all of the 2.1 million workers who make aviation possible —paid, connected to healthcare, out of the unemployment lines, and ready to lift the entire country.

This program used efficient systems already in place through airline payrolls, keeping benefits and payroll taxes in place, and maintaining the basis for retirement security both through government programs and company benefits. We continued paying taxes that supported the jobs we all count on through state and local budgets, like sanitation, firefighters, mass transit, education, and emergency response. At a time of great uncertainty for the industry, aviation workers had the stability to continue spending into the economy and the confidence that they and their family members would have access to healthcare in the middle of the pandemic. Fundamentally, PSP allowed us to take care of ourselves so that our country could focus on those who were sick or vulnerable, while also continuing to support the safety net programs we need well after this pandemic is over. It is well documented that the public received an outsized return on all its investments to help aviation recover from COVID. And, to keep the crisis capitalists from using bankruptcies and scarcity to further erode our jobs.

The program was also a model for how Congress can condition its spending to ensure accountability. PSP funding is authorized exclusively to maintain the salaries, wages, and benefits of aviation workers. Corporate restrictions during the relief period and for years after included, no dividends, no stock buybacks, and unprecedented caps on executive compensation. It conditioned the carriers' receipt of federal funds on making no involuntary furloughs or layoffs. Participating carriers also were required to maintain levels of scheduled service, critical to maintaining air travel to smaller communities. In the pandemic this was especially important to ensure well-functioning health care and pharmaceutical supply chains to serve small and remote communities across the country.

PSP was an overwhelming success, responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of jobs across our industry, and maintaining critical spending in our communities, where every aviation job supports 3.55 additional jobs, or 1 in 14 jobs in the country.

Through PSP, our unions saved American aviation, and likely the economy. The airline executives could never have done this alone, and certainly didn't suggest the constraints on executive pay or stock buybacks that resulted in aviation being the only industry not to grow in inequality over the course of the pandemic. In the years leading up to the pandemic, the airlines



had sunk their profits into Wall Street greed, issuing billions in stock buybacks to juice shareholder value (and enrich executives) rather than saving for a rainy day or investing in the airlines for consumers and workers alike.

Without PSP, we would have seen hundreds of thousands of aviation workers furloughed. Many would have left the industry altogether. Just as we suffered for twenty years after 9/11, mothers and fathers would have told their children to stay away from aviation jobs. Aviation workers are required to undergo strict training, certification and background checks, including regular safety training required to stay current. If our industry had seen mass furloughs and departures, the process of rehiring, recertifying and retraining our entire industry would have put a years-long choke point on our economy. You may remember the chaos of the summer and fall of 2022, when a combination of weather, technology and staffing issues led to mass cancellations and delays. At that point, airlines were at roughly ninety-five percent of their pre-pandemic staffing. Imagine what the industry would have looked like if instead of seven to ten percent attrition we saw during the pandemic, we had seen layoffs of thirty percent or more.

If you've taken a flight, received a package by airmail or enjoyed fresh foods shipped by air in the last three years, you can thank an aviation union for making sure that American aviation didn't collapse—and for holding corporate greed in our industry in check in the process.

The PSP is also an example of something else: when we work together, we can achieve things that were thought impossible. On March 18, 2020, I walked into a room to pitch this plan to the CEOs of America's biggest airlines. Because we have a long history, and because of the unprecedented crisis, they were willing to hear me out. Together, we walked into Congress to pitch our plan. I can't tell you how many people told me it would never get done. Even members of my own team—people who poured their hearts into the effort—did not believe we could get something like this through Congress. But we did. Through tireless advocacy and teamwork, we secured the initial aid, protected it from efforts by then-Treasury Secretary Mnuchin to sabotage it, and even renewed it twice. Along the way, we secured the support of Democrats and Republicans. In fact, alongside champions in the Democratic Senate caucus, one of the critical supporters was Senator Roger Wicker.

It's also instructive to look at the one thing we proposed that was left out of the program. The corporate boards understood that airlines are deeply unpopular, and that any hope of receiving grants that would keep the industry afloat would also require that they accept terms they didn't like. They agreed to stop stock buybacks. They agreed to halt dividend payments to shareholders. They agreed to cap executive compensation and bonuses. But going in, we also said they would have to agree to simply follow the law with neutrality in union organizing while utilizing the government grants. That was Delta Air Lines' red line. They were willing to give up their own bonuses and the gifts to Wall Street. But they would rather take the risk that the entire industry would collapse than agree to allow workers to organize without interference. And I will remind you, this is in an industry that is eighty percent unionized already.

That tells you something important. The deepest fear of the ownership class isn't sharing a bit more of the wealth, although they're not fond of that either. Their true fear is giving up control over the working people whose labor creates all of the value in our economy.

Despite the clear statutory language in the CARES Act requiring carriers who receive payroll grants to maintain pay levels and benefits, Delta Air Lines was the first out of the gate with cuts to hours and worker take home pay. The carrier made the decision to cut ground crew hours by as much as 40%<sup>1</sup> without consulting with workers. Delta Air Lines Flight Attendants asked their management to commit to a minimum number of monthly hours equivalent to the amount delineated in the Flight Attendant contract of Delta's closest industry comparator, but Delta management refused to do so, making clear its plans to slash Flight Attendant hours and benefits below established industry minimum standards as well. Delta pushed three to four times as many flight attendants into early retirement and moved flight attendants to the kitchens and other jobs that didn't pay as much as the flight attendant jobs the program was intended to protect. Unions kept airlines honest during the relief period, but where unions didn't exist Delta didn't follow the rules or respect the contributions of taxpayers. Unions are needed to help enforce our country's laws and investments.

### **No Stock Buybacks Before Contracts and Reliable Operations**

The Payroll Support Program ban on airline company stock buybacks ended on September 30, 2022. Six weeks before that ban lifted the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA-CWA), the Air Line Pilots Association, Int'l (ALPA), the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA), the Communications Workers of America (CWA), International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Transport Workers Union of America (TWU), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), representing hundreds of thousands of aviation workers, launched a public campaign demanding that airlines pledge to stabilize the industry with reliable operations and good jobs before diverting any airline profits to Wall Street through stock buybacks.

From 2014 through 2019, United, Southwest, American and Delta rewarded Wall Street with more than \$39 billion in combined stock buybacks. That money that should have been invested in better passenger experiences, staffing, and good jobs. Early in the pandemic, aviation unions secured a historic relief package, the Payroll Support Program (PSP), to keep workers in their jobs with pay and benefits. It also barred airline executives from utilizing stock manipulation tricks through September 30, 2022.

We explained, "We paused the greed in aviation for a little while with legislative constraints tied to COVID relief. But the greed that ran rampant before COVID created a system that was already stretched thin with minimum staffing and high overtime hours. We can't allow executives to send one dime to Wall Street before they fix operational issues and conclude contract negotiations that will ensure pay and benefits keep and attract people to aviation jobs."

In just the first half of 2022, U.S. airlines canceled more flights than in all of 2021, disrupting travel for millions of passengers and creating high-stress conditions for aviation workers. Unions are calling for airlines to resolve the ongoing operational chaos by better aligning staffing and scheduling to meet demand and concluding delayed labor contract negotiations.

So far, our demand for no stock buybacks has worked. It matters for workers and consumers alike. Anyone interested in supporting the campaign can learn more and sign the petition at [nostockbuybacks.org](http://nostockbuybacks.org).

### **Start in the workplace**

I always tell people, “start in the workplace, and the politics will follow.” When Mineworkers and Teamsters first organized, there were no friendly laws to protect them. Today, union busters pull workers into captive-audience meetings to issue thinly veiled threats or buy us off with pizza. As our union organizing campaign grows stronger at Delta Air Lines, the anti-union propaganda and heavy-handed pizza parties have shifted to steak dinners. When the Teamsters were founded in 1903, workers who tried to organize their workplaces were met with batons and bullets.

The laws we have today - while eroded by Congress and the Court since first enacted - took shape because workers fought. We held up the mirror to America and forced Washington to see the untenable treatment of everyday people by the coal barons and the steel barons and the railroad barons. We marched and we fought and eventually Washington responded. The National Labor Relations Act was a compromise—it gave workers a legal framework to organize and bargain, because the alternative was more violent clashes with the bosses’ goons, angry protests in the streets and a halt to energy and commerce across the country.

But today, the labor laws of the Great Depression have been weakened almost beyond recognition. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and National Mediation Board (NMB) have been so defunded that they simply cannot enforce the laws that remain effectively, and when they can take up a case the consequences are irrelevant to today’s coffee barons and two-day-shipping barons and starship barons.

That’s why Amazon feels no fear when they blatantly interfere with union elections in Bessemer, Alabama, or refuse to bargain in good faith with warehouse workers in Staten Island. It’s why Howard Schultz closes down stores where workers have voted for a union, fires union organizers and illegally offers raises and benefits to non-union stores even with the national spotlight on his actions. It’s why Elon Musk has repeatedly broken labor laws from the Tesla assembly floor in Fremont, California to the cubicles where workers are programming autopilot in Buffalo, New York.

It’s why Delta Air Lines makes no effort to hide its illegal union busting against the Flight Attendants, Ramp agents and mechanics who are fighting to organize their unions with the

Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM).

It's why the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), United Parcel Service (UPS) and the Big 3 automakers didn't bother negotiating in good faith until strike deadlines had passed, and why corporate offices at Alaska, United and American Airlines aren't worried about dragging out contract negotiations for months or years beyond contract expiration.

Without the support of strong legal consequences, the only way to make corporations accountable is through worker action. And that is what we are seeing today.

The oldest labor law, the Railway Labor Act, was changed in 2012 to require a majority of physical card signers within a year in order to trigger a union election. And, administratively, administrations have eroded the right to strike by refusing to release workers from mediation when at an impasse with the corporations. There has been no change to the law that for more than 70 years provided workers with the ability to threaten or carry out the right to strike in order to come to an agreement with the airlines. But beginning in the late 1990s, negotiations shifted from an average of 18 months to more than five years - delaying improvements and causing workers to fall further behind. There's been no change to the law, but a disdain for collective bargaining and worker rights led to a destruction of the right to strike by refusing to release the parties from mediation and set a strike deadline. The last release was given in 2010 for the Spirit Pilots who achieved a contract after only a handful of days on strike. From routine use of the strike deadline to encourage the parties to reach agreement to one release in 20 years, workers have suffered the cost of never-ending negotiations. And companies have suffered the cost of eroded morale and inability to attract candidates to aviation jobs. Everyone has something to lose in a strike - the company and the workers - and it is a critical component to effective collective bargaining that balances interests and maintains a more just economy. Our union will press our rights for collective bargaining with the right to strike that's necessary to achieve the long overdue improvements we need - double digit pay increases, pay for all of our time on the job, scheduling protections that help consumers from operational meltdowns too, and a secure retirement with no additional costs for our healthcare.

American flight attendants voted 99.5% in favor of a strike if the company fails to meet the demands of flight attendants that are long overdue. Airlines industry workers were set to negotiate across the industry in 2020, but the pandemic put that on hold. The Payroll Support System thankfully maintained the status quo, but without new contracts workers are falling behind total compensation we had just prior to 9/11 when adjusted for inflation. Alaska and United flight attendants are taking strike votes in the near term too. We need and expect the improvements we have earned, especially in the most tumultuous time on the job in the history of our careers.

## Echoes of the Past

Workers today have more in common with the mineworkers in Ludlow than you may think, and our fights carry echoes of those historic fights.

One of the core demands in Ludlow was pay for “dead work.” At the time, miners were paid for the tonnage of coal they dug. Members of the committee may remember the miner’s refrain, “You dig sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt.” Work like digging and fortifying the mines was considered “dead work” and unpaid. Not only did this mean no compensation for backbreaking labor, it pushed workers to take greater risks to dig more coal. Rather than wait to fortify a new shaft, workers might continue digging in areas that were unsafe. When your choice is between feeding your children and waiting for a safety check, it’s easy to choose your children. And when they emerged from the mines, many miners went to their company-owned home and used company scrip to buy goods at the company store. They were often paid too little to cover all the costs the company imposed, so they went into debt to the companies they worked for and became trapped by the mine owners.

A year ago, Americans were shocked to learn that Flight Attendants are not paid until the cabin door closes and the plane pushes back from the gate. As our union and our sister unions negotiate new contracts, we’re demanding an end to that “dead work” and pay for the full time we’re on the job.

Teamsters and Auto Workers one hundred years ago demanded the eight-hour workday, workplace safety rules, equal pay and fair benefits. In their landmark contracts, Teamsters and Auto Workers secured rules against forced overtime, unsafe working conditions and an end to the two-tier wage systems that left some workers forever earning too little to get ahead.

We may not live in company towns or shop at company stores, but more and more jobs don’t cover the cost of living. More and more of us struggle to pay rising rents in apartments owned by the same Wall Street investment firms that are pushing our employers to cut our pay and benefits, and pushing grocery stores and for-profit hospitals to raise prices for customers and lower wages for workers. The unbridled greed of the billionaire class undergirds our struggles at every turn, just as it did when J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. controlled our economy more than 100 years ago.

The way the ownership class views working people hasn’t changed much in those hundred years. After the Ludlow Massacre and the Coalfield Wars in 1914, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. was called before Congress, where he testified that even knowing his hired goons had committed murder he “would have taken no action”<sup>7</sup> to stop them from attacking more strikers.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5735/>

A few weeks into the writers' and actors' strikes this year, an anonymous executive told an industry press outlet "The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses."<sup>8</sup>

Just as Rockefeller's words galvanized workers AND Congress to act, the studios' disrespect spurred writers and actors to greater solidarity.

The last time actors and writers went on strike together in 1960, they demanded residuals for TV and film, investment in their health and pension funds. In the deals negotiated this year through record-breaking strikes, writers and actors won residuals for their work on streaming productions, improved pay, working conditions and benefits. Perhaps most notably, both groups beat back the idea that they could be replaced by artificial intelligence and the disgusting proposals that their works and their likenesses could become property of the studios to replicate and profit from in perpetuity.

My union is proud to be the next tip in the spear for working people. We are engaged in a years-long fight at America's largest airlines. At Delta, as I mentioned before, Flight Attendants are coming together in an inspiring campaign to unionize the last major American carrier where our flying partners have no protections, no guarantees and no rights on the job. Delta's profits exceed the other airlines by billions. As President Shawn Fain has said, "record profits require record contracts." While we work together to build solidarity, Delta management has repeatedly demonstrated its disdain for workers, for example by proposing that instead of forming a union workers should buy an X-Box.

At legacy carriers like United, Alaska and American, our union and our sister union the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) are fighting for a fair share of the record profits that we create, protections from violence and harassment on the job, and a greater say in our workplaces.

I must tell you this: I have never seen workers so united. At Delta, as I mentioned before, Flight Attendants, Ramp agents and mechanics are all organizing. In the past, management has told us that if one of us gets more, someone must get less. But today AFA, the Teamsters and the IAM are working together to support these courageous workers, and we are all supported by the Air Line Pilots Association. For generations, AFA and APFA were fed rumors about one another that seeped from management and poisoned our ability to work together. But today, we have overcome those divide-and-conquer strategies and we are united as one workforce to fight for the contracts and respect on the job flight attendants and other aviation workers deserve.

You see it everywhere you look. The baristas who make your coffee. The clerks who bag your groceries. The pharmacists who fill your prescriptions. The teachers who nurture your children. Bus drivers, delivery workers, hotel staff, electricians. Across our economy, workers are coming together to fight for our fair share, for a decent life and a shot to live the American dream. This

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/07/studios-allegedly-wont-end-strike-til-writers-start-losing-their-apartments>

year, support for unions—and Americans’ desire to have a union in their workplace—rose to the highest level in recorded history.

### **SkyWest Airlines Has Broken Labor Law for Years - We’ve Had to Take Them to Court**

AFA has filed a federal lawsuit against SkyWest Airlines, the regional airline that operates flights for Delta, Alaska, United, and American, and the SkyWest Inflight Association after the airline fired two longtime Flight Attendants, Tresa Grange with nearly 25 years with the company and Shane Price with 9 years. These Flight Attendants were fired for being lead activists who brought to light significant credible concerns over the voting procedures for the SkyWest Inflight Association.

The SkyWest Inflight Association is an organization illegally propped up by SkyWest management that pretends to independently represent the flight attendants at SkyWest but is instead completely funded by SkyWest management. The way that SIA operates tricks flight attendants that they have a union without providing the same benefits that a union provides under the Railway Labor Act.

This lawsuit is filed to remedy SkyWest Airlines’ extraordinary violations of the Railway Labor Act and interference with its Flight Attendants’ federal right to seek collective bargaining representation,” the complaint reads,<sup>9</sup> “SkyWest unlawfully uses carrier funds to maintain and operate Defendant SkyWest Inflight Association, which it claims is the representative for its Flight Attendant employees. SIA has acknowledged in one of its Handbooks that ‘SkyWest ...funds the SkyWest Inflight Association.’”

### **Fight the right fight**

For decades, the billionaires convinced us to fight one another. And they’re trying as hard as they can today. If you watch the news you might believe we’re more divided than we’ve ever been. And it’s true that our politics are creating enormous strain on our relationships with one another and with the very idea of America - a country rich with diversity of experience, ideas, and strength from people around the world.

But when you walk into a union meeting, you see that we can find common ground. That’s what the billionaires are afraid of. When I say “start in the workplace and the politics will follow,” I mean that workplace solidarity overcomes the politics of division and that money doesn’t control our politics when workers organize to take our fair share and claim our fair say in our democracy. When we realize that if the boss can fire you because of who you love or where you come from, he can fire me because of what I believe. When we understand that we are only as strong as the worker next to us, we want to make sure the worker next to us has the strength to fight—and sometimes that means lending them our strength, as the mineworkers did for the UAW’s earliest fights, and as many of us have done for others over the generations.

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<sup>9</sup> [2-23-cv-00723.pdf](#)

A union meeting is always a raucous place. But in our meetings, we learn democracy. We learn how to disagree but come together in the end. We learn how to make decisions for the greater good. We learn to negotiate, to collaborate, to listen and to find mutual respect—even in places where it seems impossible.

When we find solidarity, we find power. We can use that power to hold capital accountable, to ensure that our voices are heard, our contributions respected and our work rewarded. When we build that power in the workplace, we build power in society. It's no mistake that even some of the most anti-union elected officials were out on the UAW's picket lines. They may vote against us when the chips are down, but they understand that there is power in our unions. There's a reason that Joe Biden became the first sitting President of the United States to walk a picket line. Yes, it's because he's a union man. But working people built the political power to make it possible for him to step out and clearly support us.

That is what the exploiters fear; that our solidarity will build enough power to hold capital accountable to working people. For fifty years, more and more of the benefits of capitalism have gone to a tiny few at the top. Today, income is more unequal than even in the Gilded Age. A handful of individuals control more wealth than the bottom half combined. Real wages have stagnated while they built mega-yachts and flew private jets to their tropical islands—and put politicians and judges on those jets and yachts beside them.

I have a question for this committee, and a message for those billionaires who want to bleed the working class and the world dry. To the billionaires I say: there is plenty for everyone. You can still be fabulously wealthy, but if you continue to try to keep us poor you will find that working people are not going to take it anymore. To the members of this committee, to the elected leaders across this country and around the world, I ask you the question that working people have asked for generations: Which side are you on?

## **Conclusion**

Thank you to Chairman Sanders and Dr. Cassidy for the opportunity to testify today. Unions are necessary for a stable economy, our safety, our security, and our democracy. Nothing is more important for our nation to succeed than unions, collective bargaining, dialog required between divergent groups, solutions to the existential threats we face, and the strength and future of our world and nation. The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA is prepared to do our part. I look forward to your questions.