

Behind the Boeing Incidents: Profits trump Public safety

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WHAT IS GOING on with the safety of major airlines? United, Alaska, Southwest since the begging of the year have had major incidents.

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So far, the incidents and near catastrophes have involved Boeing-built aircraft assembled both in unionized factories in Washington State (757 Max) and nonunion facilities in South Carolina (787 Dreamliner).

Subcontractors also make many of the parts. Overall, unions represent only 35 percent of the 163,000 employees.

Workers in the so-called “right to work” states of the South do the same work but earn much less. These anti-union laws mean that workers, even in a unionized plant, don’t have to join the union.

Yet all Boeing workers — union or nonunion — understand that the problem is management and quality control, as corporate executives rush to build too fast to increase profits.

The federal government agencies — Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) — have let the airlines off the hook for years since Boeing began building its new 737 Max aircraft in 2015.

The FAA looks out for the airline industry and manufacturers, not the safety of workers and the public. The NTSB, which leads the investigations, is better but has no enforcement powers.

New Deeper Crisis

“For years, we prioritized the movement of the airplane through the factory over getting it done right, and that’s got to change,” Brian West, Boeing’s chief financial officer, recently told an investor conference.

The March 28 *New York Times* under the headline, “Shortcuts everywhere: How Boeing favored speed over quality” summarized the current crisis:

"In February last year [2023], a new Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 Max plane was on one of its first flights when an automated stabilizing system appeared to malfunction, forcing the pilots to make an emergency landing soon after they took off.

"Less than two months later, an Alaska Airlines 737 Max plane with eight hours of total flight time was briefly grounded until mechanics resolved a problem with a fire detection system. And in November, an engine on a just-delivered United Airlines 737 Max failed at 37,000 feet.

"`These incidents, which the airlines disclosed to the Federal Aviation Administration, were not widely reported... But since January 5, when a panel on a two-month-old Alaska Airlines 737 Max 9 jet blew off in midair, episodes like these have taken on new resonance, raising further questions about the quality of the planes Boeing is producing.

"`There's a lot of areas where things don't seem to be put together right in the first place,' said Joe Jacobsen, an engineer and aviation safety expert who spent more than a decade at Boeing and more than 25 years at the FAA.

"`The theme is shortcuts everywhere — not doing the job right,' he added."

2018-19 Deadly Crashes

Despite its brief time on the market (first commercial flight was May 2017), Max 8 has been involved in two tragedies in less than five months: the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crash on March 10, 2019, and the earlier Indonesian owned Lion Air Flight 302 crash on October 29, 2018, when a total of 346 people died.

After blaming "pilot error," Boeing revealed a dangerous sensor that forced the planes into a dive, of which the pilots were never informed.

Davin Fischer, a former mechanic in Renton, Washington, told Seattle TVB station KIRO 7 that he saw a "cultural shift" starting around 2017, when the company introduced the Max.

"They were trying to get the plane rate up and then just kept crunching, crunching and crunching to go faster, faster, faster," he said.

Several current and former employees in South Carolina and in Washington State, the *NYT* reported, said mechanics building planes were allowed in some instances to sign off on their own work, stripping a crucial layer of quality control.

Boeing Unions Sidelined

Boeing has shaken up its executive suite. But what it has not done is bring in the voices of the unions on its leadership bodies.

The people who do the actual work — technicians and engineers — are left out of the decision-making process.

It is common under capitalism that big business does not listen to those at the point of production. Workers have knowledge, experience and expertise. But they are not or rarely ever listened to until there is a tragedy.

Boeing has also had many whistleblowers in lower management. Most are forced into early retirement or pushed out.

I worked at United Airlines for more than two decades as a mechanic — at the San Francisco airport and in the shops. I served as a shop steward for the unions and a contract negotiator.

While mechanics were regularly given refresher training on the aircraft they worked, it was also understood that all maintenance had a long paper trail — so if an incident occurred in flight there would be a verifiable reason, unless caused by a bird in an engine or other foreign object debris (FOD).

Workforce Turnover and Consequences

As *The Times* reported, in late 2022 “Boeing lost veteran engineers who retired to lock in bigger monthly pension payments, which were tied to interest rates, according to the union that represents them, the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace.

“More than 1,700 union members left the company that year, up from around 1,000 the year before. The members who left had been at the company for more than 23 years on average.”

The union’s executive director Ray Goforth stated that he thought the company used the opportunity to replace veteran workers with “lower-paid entry-level engineers and technical workers.”

District 751 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) union, representing more than 30,000 Boeing employees, said the proportion of its members with less than six years’ experience has roughly doubled to 50 percent since the pandemic.

The Associated Press reported that the top executives of United Airlines and Alaska Airlines took turns blasting Boeing over manufacturing problems that led to the grounding of more than 140 planes, with United’s CEO saying his airline will consider alternatives to buying a future larger version of the Boeing 737 Max.

United CEO Scott Kirby said that Boeing needs “real action” to restore its previous reputation for quality.

The strong and unusual criticism of Boeing by airline executives followed the January 5 event when a panel called door plug blew off an Alaska Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner 16,000 feet (4,900 meters) above Oregon, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the plane.

Labor’s Response

Washington State’s pro-labor website *The Stand* reported:

“Earlier this month [March], IAM District 751 [began negotiations](#) with Boeing on a new union contract to cover more than 32,000 production workers.

“In addition to a seat on the company board, the union is seeking a wage increase of at least 40 percent over three to four years, restoring retirement security by reinstating the defined-benefit pension plan the company took away in 2014, lowering out-of-pocket healthcare costs, easing mandatory overtime and other work rules that negatively impact work-life balance, and ensuring

that Boeing's next airplane is built in the Puget Sound region."

District 751 President Jon Holden released the following statement:

"We believe our voice and the voice of the engineers must be heard at the highest level of the company's decision-making process.

"The safety of aircraft manufacturing isn't negotiable and must be safeguarded above all else. We are committed to instilling a culture where the safety of aircraft production is an absolute imperative over anything else."

Bob Fisher, Interim Director of the Teamsters Airline Division, issued a March 27 statement regarding the Federal Aviation Administration announcement that the agency will increase its oversight of United Airlines:

"Our dedicated technicians put their credentials on the line every day. All Teamsters aviation mechanics are fully aware that their work must be in accordance with the highest standards set forth by their employer and the FAA...

"United Airlines technicians will continue to provide the highest level of safety to all crewmembers and passengers because they believe in these standards to their core

The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) represents technicians at both Alaska and Southwest Airlines. It sent accident teams to investigations but has little say over company policy except through contract negotiations.

Unlike other unions, AMFA uses "open negotiations" to keep its members informed and to get their input. It seeks contractual changes to improve safety and hold the airline executives accountable.

The workers and unions must have a place at the table. The Teamsters' demand at Boeing is justified so long as it remains independent and can discuss openly with its members without secrecy restrictions.

Only steps like these can begin to exert the influence of working people before major incidents. Mechanics always place safety first since they and their families fly the same aircraft they service.

However, shortcuts pushed by management are out of workers' control unless it violates the contract or clear safety regulations. Floor action is then possible to prevent unsafe corporate acts.

The lesson of the recent incidents and earlier 737 Max crashes is that more power must be given to the workers who assemble, maintain and fix the planes that we all fly.

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