



Speak Out Now

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Airline Industry: Their Profits Over Our Lives

The airline industry in the United States has been in the news recently after a series of alarming safety incidents. In January, a panel blew off the side of a Boeing jet operated by Alaska Airlines in mid-flight, forcing pilots to make an emergency landing. In March 2024 alone, there have been at least 10 reported safety incidents with United Airlines as some of their planes have had wheels and panels fall off while flying.

While there has been renewed scrutiny of this industry recently, these incidents are not new. Boeing in particular has been notorious for safety problems. In recent years, design defects in the 737 Max plane led to two fatal plane crashes in 2018 and 2019 which killed 346 people and caused the 737 Max planes to be grounded for over a year.

Boeing has come into focus again related to the Alaska Airlines blowout, but also after the suspicious death earlier this month of company whistleblower John Barnett. Barnett worked in quality control at Boeing for 30 years and was fired by the company in 2017 after consistently calling out and documenting how Boeing cut corners on safety to speed up and increase production output.

Barnett was found dead in his car on March 11, this year, from a gunshot wound just days after testifying in a whistleblower lawsuit against the company. Investigators have determined that his cause of death was suicide. But it has since come out that Barnett thought his life may have been in danger due to his testimony against Boeing, telling close friends that if he ever was found dead, they should not believe any story that he committed suicide.

While Boeing is under the spotlight, this pattern of safety issues is widespread across the industry beyond just one company. They are the outcome of an industry that has prioritized profits at the expense of robust safety culture in all aspects of their operations.

The most recent news has focused on manufacturing and quality control issues, where management for companies like Boeing intentionally pressure workers to overlook production defects in order to produce and sell more planes.

But there are also major staffing issues that airlines have created contributing to these problems. For example, after receiving billions of dollars of government relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, many airlines like American Airlines used the funds to finance the early retirement of thousands of pilots to cut costs and buy back their own stocks instead of investing in their workforce and safety.

As a result, many experienced pilots have left the industry. This means fewer experienced pilots are mentoring and training younger pilots on dealing with crisis situations in the event of mechanical problems. When mechanical problems happen, it is often experienced pilots and flight attendants that remain calm and safely land planes without crashing. Because of their skill and expertise, many more safety incidents are avoided than the ones we hear about in the news.

Finally, this culture persists because of the incredible political power of the airline industry, which donates millions of dollars to politicians that oversee and are responsible for regulating them. The current head of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the agency responsible for regulating air travel in the United States, was a senior corporate executive for United Airlines for 15 years before President Biden appointed him as the head of the FAA!

The state of the airline industry and persistent safety issues affect many of us. This has created a situation where their profits are prioritized over our lives, this negligence has killed people and could kill more. From healthcare, to transportation, to energy production, all production is guided by one measure – profits. Instead – we need to put our lives first!