

# The United Airlines beating of David Dao and the case for public ownership of the airline industry

By Eric London  
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The video of a 69-year-old doctor being beaten and dragged off a United Airlines flight by police in Chicago has generated widespread international outrage. Nearly half a billion people have viewed the video, including several hundred million people in China and Vietnam alone, where the beating was justifiably understood as an act of discrimination. The victim, David Dao, is a medical doctor based in Kentucky who was born in Vietnam.

Dao's beating is the product of the monopolization, deregulation and financialization of the airline industry. United's decision to order the police to beat an innocent man who stood in the way of their drive for profit is only a particularly brutal expression of a generalized process taking place in the world economy over the course of the last 40 years.

The Gestapo-like tactics of the police sum up the role of the state in using violence against the population to enforce the demands of the corporate elite. Over the past 15 years, airports have become hotbeds of military and police surveillance, with travelers forced to undergo intrusive and humiliating searches in the name of "national security." The omnipresence of heavily armed police has become part of the increasingly militarized fabric of American life.

The beating of Dao can be seen as the convergence of the "war on terror" with the daily violence of the police on America's streets.

Dao was boarding a flight from Chicago to Louisville, Kentucky to return home in time for patient visits scheduled for Monday. Though United first claimed it removed Dao because the flight was overbooked, the airline now claims that space had to be made for four employees to work a shift the next day in

Louisville.

None of the four passengers who were asked to leave got up from their seats, including Dao and his wife, and the airline called the police, who proceeded to beat Dao until he was bloody, dragging him through the plane. United CEO Oscar Munoz added fuel to the fire by issuing a statement praising the employees for following the company manual. He referred to the beating as a "re-assignment" and called Dao "belligerent and disruptive."

On Tuesday, the corporate media began denigrating Dao, who reportedly has a criminal conviction from over a decade ago. "NBC Nightly News" highlighted Dao's legal record as though it made him culpable for what took place. ABC News ran the headline: "Man removed from jet is Kentucky doctor with criminal record." Publications such as *USA Today*, the *Chicago Sun Times*, the *Toronto Sun*, *People Magazine* and the tabloid press followed suit.

The company lost \$600 billion in value on Monday due to a stock sell-off, but as BuzzFeed Business Editor Tom Gara explained, "United is unlikely to suffer serious long-term consequences for Monday's public relations disaster...because there isn't much competition in the US airline industry."

Monopolization and deregulation have transformed for-profit air travel in the United States into a social disaster.

Last year, airlines forced over 40,000 ticketed passengers off of flights for which they had paid. Airlines charge passengers large sums for necessities such as checked luggage and compel travelers to pay extra for a decent seat. Spirit Airlines orders its flight attendants to deny passenger requests for free cups of

water.

Many travel delays are caused by the fact that airline corporations can trade takeoff and landing slots with one another. Speculators and companies participate in a massive secondary market to wager on slot trading, and financial institutions often use slots as security to finance other financial instruments.

A 2015 study by Jose Azar, Martin C. Schmalz and Isabel Tecu titled “Anti-Competitive Effects of Common Ownership” exposes the monopolistic character of the airline industry and its links to the finance industry. The report notes that the degree of share ownership concentration is directly linked to higher pricing, more delays and lower quality, and that the more invested financial firms are, the worse the service. The report quotes an officer of a financial firm who says he would “like to see [airline corporations] boost their fares but also cut capacity.”

The study shows that five of the seven largest United shareholders are also the biggest shareholders of Delta Airlines and Southwest Airlines, and that large financial shareholders own 49.5 percent of United stock. The major shareholders include Berkshire Hathaway, BlackRock, Vanguard and JPMorgan. Many of these firms are also the biggest investors in American banks and pharmaceutical, technology and weapons firms. Berkshire Hathaway lost \$58 million in United’s stock drop on Monday.

Financialization and monopolization have been facilitated by bipartisan deregulatory efforts beginning with the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, signed into law by Democratic President Jimmy Carter. In the past decade, the number of major airlines dominating the market has shrunk from nine to five. In 2013, the Obama administration dropped opposition to a merger between American Airlines and US Airways after having previously approved the merger of United and Continental, as well as of Southwest and AirTran.

*ProPublica*’s Justin Elliott wrote in October 2016 that airlines “tapped former Obama administration officials and other well-connected Democrats to launch an intense lobbying campaign” to force through the American-US Airways merger. The airlines “used their pull in the administration, including at the White House” with people like “Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s White House chief of staff,” to ram through the merger.

The Trump administration plans to further deregulate the industry. In February, Trump met with airline CEOs, including United’s Oscar Munoz, to discuss further deregulation. Future deregulation will make conditions even more unsafe, expensive, environmentally destructive and personally unbearable for travelers.

The beating of David Dao highlights the need to take the airline industry out of the hands of Wall Street so that air travel can be brought into harmony with human and social needs.

The technological advances that have been made in air travel over the past decades are indisputable. For the first time in world history, travelers can move from any two points in the world within a single day. This technology must be freed from the restraints of the capitalist system. Under socialism, air travel will play a central role in facilitating the free interchange of ideas, cultures and people, who will not be barred from international travel by lack of funds or restrictions on their immigration status.

At their choosing, residents of today’s most isolated villages in underdeveloped regions will be free to travel to the world’s great capitals, monuments and museums, and families currently separated across different continents by war and forced migration will be free to reunite. Through the organic process of global social interaction, new cultures will emerge that enrich humanity’s social and intellectual life.

This requires the nationalization of the major airlines, their transformation into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities, and the redistribution of the billions of dollars in profits the corporations have accrued through the exploitation of their employees to meet the needs of the working class.

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