

Some unionized Alaska Air workers earn less than minimum wage

By our reporter
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Recent reports in the *Seattle Times* illustrate the way that the unions function essentially as labor contractors, offering up workers as a cheap labor force and suppressing resistance in exchange for the right to extract dues payments.

According to the *Times*, unionized baggage handlers employed by Alaska Airlines subsidiary McGee Air Services and cargo-ramp workers directly employed by Alaska Airlines have been working for less than the minimum wage levels established by local ordinances in the cities of SeaTac, Washington; San Francisco and San Jose, California. In SeaTac, McGee baggage handlers earn 20 cents less than the present minimum of \$15.64 an hour while new hires start at only \$14.94 per hour.

Alaska Airlines workers who unload and load cargo planes start at a measly rate of only \$11.74 per hour. The work is backbreaking and grueling, and quite frequently done under adverse weather conditions. The attrition rate is high. Alaska guarantees that bags will be delivered to luggage carousels within 20 minutes of the plane landing, thus creating onerous speedup conditions for the handlers.

In 2013 residents of the city of SeaTac voted for Proposition 1, which mandated employers in the hospitality and transportation industries pay approximately 6,000 workers at least \$15 per hour. SeaTac was one of the first municipalities to implement this ordinance in the US. The \$15 per hour minimum wage effort resulted from the legitimate grievances of some of the most exploited sections of the working class but was subverted by the unions, specifically the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), as a way of lining their pockets with the dues money of the workers.

Five years ago, the \$15 minimum was a paltry sum in

every part of the country, especially in Seattle, whose cost-of-living index trails only New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Now \$15 an hour is a starvation wage, leaving airport workers needing food stamps and housing assistance just to survive, condemning them to a hand-to-mouth existence.

Alaska, which had a net income of just over \$1 billion for 2017, has been able to egregiously exploit the baggage handlers and cargo-ramp workers through the anti-worker, corporatist policies of the unions. After laying off 900 managers, mechanics, and plane cleaners in late 2004, Alaska initially demanded more than \$2 million in concessions in the 2005 contract negotiations. Then Alaska, with no opposition from the International Association of Machinists (IAM), outsourced its baggage handling to Menzies Aviation, a nonunion vendor. The already penurious wages of the baggage handlers were slashed by 40 percent. Alaska then demanded \$112 million in concessions from the pilots and flight attendants. The airline also closed the flight attendant base in Portland, Oregon, forcing the flight attendants to relocate, commute from Portland on their own time, or quit.

In August of 2008, a federal arbitrator ruled that Alaska's offloading of the baggage handling operation was in violation of its contract with the IAM. In December of 2013, Alaska and local businesses filed a motion in King County Superior Court to strike down the ordinance. The court upheld the ordinance but ruled that some 4,700 workers employed by vendors, contractors, and car rental outfits were not covered by the law.

King County Superior Court Judge Andrea Darvas stated that the ordinance was not enforceable at the airport because of a decades-old law which granted the Port of Seattle sole jurisdiction over airport operations.

In August of 2015, the Washington State Supreme Court overturned Darvas' decision in a 5-to-4 judgement, but then the workers had to file class-action lawsuits to win back pay due them from January 1, 2014. Menzies Aviation agreed to pay \$8.2 million in back wages to 738 then current and previous employees while Prospect International Airport Services, a provider of assistance to the handicapped and luggage handling, paid out \$1.98 million to 291 then current and former employees. The awards were not made until a year later in September of 2016.

In February of 2016, SeaTac workers filed class action lawsuits on behalf of 1,500 workers against 14 companies for being paid less than the \$15 per hour minimum. Included in the list of companies are the Hertz, Fox, National, and Alamo car rental agencies, GCA Services, Shuttle Express, baggage handlers Menzies Aviation and Bags Inc, international shipper Hanjin, aviation-services company ASIG, and other food service, logistics and rental car outfits. Some workers' wages were as low as \$9.75 per hour, with most getting only \$12 an hour.

Lawyers representing the cheated workers speculate that some employees were robbed of as much as a third of their income and had as much as \$20,000 in unpaid salaries during the two years that the ordinance had been in effect. Many of the workers are immigrants who are challenged with respect to the English language and who also live in fear of retaliation from their employers. On January 11 of 2017, US District Judge Robert Lasnik ordered Menzies Aviation to pay out \$8.2 million to the workers paid less than SeaTac's \$15 per hour minimum wage requirement. That thousands of workers had to resort to legal action against such ruthless employers is a damning indictment of the unions.

In May of 2017, just two months after the court ruled that airport workers were covered in general by the ordinance, Alaska ended its baggage handling contract with Menzies and restored it to McGee Air Services.

The company was legally permitted to pay baggage handlers less than minimum wage due to the collective bargaining pact. SEIU Local 775 President David Rolf, one of the main proponents of Proposition 1, justified the exemption for unions claiming that it allowed for useful flexibility in labor negotiations. Rolf never specified what flexibility and how it benefitted

workers. The only flexibility that the union bureaucracy has shown over the last 40 years is in bending to all the dictates of management. It is clear that the IAM agreed to the exemption in return for Alaska returning the baggage handling to McGee Aviation.

Alaska contracts with other baggage handling vendors, pitting the workers of each subsidiary against those of other subsidiaries. Alaska's director of operations support, Cees Verkerk, stated that Menzies still handles baggage for Alaska in other US cities and Mexico and continues as "a very strong business partner." Verkerk stated that Alaska's switching to McGee from Menzies would be considered on a case-by-case basis or, in other words, on the ability of one vendor to force down its labor costs lower than the other.

The second exemption to the ordinance agreed to by the IAM involves the 75 cargo handlers directly employed by Alaska. The company's contract with the cargo handlers expires this year. The IAM has made it patently clear that Alaska can depend on it to do everything it can to betray the airport workers again. After the IAM agreed to the sweetheart contract with McGee Aviation in 2017, IAM Assistant Airline Coordinator James Carlson smugly stated that the union had "formed a very collaborative relationship with the leadership of McGee. They seem like a good bunch of people that care about their workers."

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