

Profits over people

US refuses to ground Boeing jet despite second crash in five months

By Barry Grey
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Two days after the crash of a Boeing 737 Max 8 commercial jet in Ethiopia that took the lives of all 157 passengers and crew members, the US government and American carriers that use the plane have refused to ground the recently introduced plane.

This is despite the fact that another 737 Max 8 crashed in Indonesia just five months earlier under what appear to be similar circumstances, killing all 189 people on board, and that virtually every other major country around the world has decided to ground the aircraft and/or ban it from its airspace pending the results of investigations into the cause of the disaster. Only Canada has to this point joined with the US in refusing to ground the plane.

Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 from Addis Ababa, bound for Nairobi, Kenya, crashed at high speed about six minutes after takeoff early Sunday morning, in clear weather with good visibility, after ascending, then descending, then ascending sharply again while accelerating to speeds in excess of what is standard during a takeoff. The CEO of the airline reported that the pilot, an experienced senior pilot with the company, radioed air traffic control that he was having “flight control problems” and asked permission to return to the airport before losing control of the plane.

The investigation is in only its initial stage and no definitive answer can be given at this time to the question of the cause or causes of the crash. The data recorder and cockpit voice recorder have both been recovered, but have not yet been read. However, the circumstances are ominously similar to the crash of a Lion Air Boeing 737 Max 8 last October, which plunged into the Java Sea only minutes after taking off from the airport in Jakarta.

Investigators have blamed that crash on a faulty sensor and automatic feature in the 737 Max models that points the nose down to avoid a stall, but about which the pilots had not been informed and which they were unable to override. As a result, the plane alternated between sharp descents and ascents until it dove into the water at 450 miles an hour.

After the crash, pilots in both Indonesia and the US said they had no knowledge of the new autopilot program that Boeing had installed in the updated 737 model, and had not been trained in its use.

Boeing evidently installed the new automated program to compensate for problems connected to the new and much larger engine in the revamped 737. Boeing built the more fuel efficient model in order to compete with its archrival for control of global markets and profits, European-based Airbus, which had introduced its own A320neo to capture a bigger share of the lucrative medium-range commercial flight market. One of Boeing’s major selling points against the A320neo was the claim that the 737 Max 8 required virtually no additional training for pilots who had flown a previous version of the 737, and was therefore cheaper to bring into service.

The context for the introduction of the 737 Max 8 and Max 9 (a longer version) was a ruthless war for control of markets against Airbus, particularly the soon-to-reach \$1 trillion Chinese air travel market, combined with a brutal cost-cutting drive within the United States. Since becoming CEO and chairman in 2015, Dennis Muilenburg (2017 compensation of more than \$18,450,000) cut the workforce by nearly 7 percent in 2016 and another 6 percent in 2017. Airbus, for its part, announced 3,700 job cuts in 2018.

Muilenburg has also been squeezing Boeing suppliers, demanding price cuts of 10 percent or more, which has led them to intensify attacks on their own workers.

Given the circumstances of the two crashes of 737 Max 8 jets, it is clear that concern for the safety of passengers and staff and the general public, not just in the US but internationally, would dictate at least a temporary suspension of flights until mechanical flaws or other design defects could be ruled out. But Boeing and the US carriers that fly the 737 Max 8 and Max 9—Southwest Airlines, American Airlines and United—have all refused to pull the planes, insisting that they are perfectly safe.

Late Monday, after China and a number of international carriers had grounded the plane, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a “continued airworthiness notification” to Boeing 737 Max operators. At the same time, Boeing announced that it would implement a software update on the 737 Max 8 in the coming weeks to “make an already safe aircraft even safer,” by making changes to “flight control law, pilot displays, operation manuals and crew training.”

The US government is maintaining this position in the face of growing calls for a ban on 737 Max flights in the United States. The flight attendants’ union at American Airlines, which flies 24 of the Max 8 jets, took the token step Tuesday, undoubtedly under massive pressure from below, of calling on American CEO Doug Parker to ground the plane. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants also told its members they would not be forced to fly on 737 Max 8s if they felt unsafe. The pilots’ union at American, the Allied Pilots Association, told its members as well they did not have to work on these aircraft.

Among those individuals who have demanded that the FAA ground the plane are Jim Hall, former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, who said in an interview, “Because this is a new model and there are similarities with the two accidents, Boeing should put safety first and ground the aircraft.”

Also calling for a ban are Ray LaHood, transportation secretary under Obama; Democratic senators Dianne Feinstein, Elizabeth Warren and Richard Blumenthal and Republican Senator Mitt Romney; and consumer advocacy groups such as *Consumer Reports* and *FlyersRights.org*.

However, the priorities of the capitalist system have nothing to do with the safety and preservation of human life. There are immense financial interests bound up with the profitability and stock price of Boeing that far outweigh the danger of more destruction of human life and suffering for the victims’ friends and family. Further shifting the scale in the direction of cover-up and deception are the geo-political and economic imperatives of defending US national industry against foreign challengers.

Boeing stock accounts for a huge portion of the run-up in share prices since the election of Trump in November of 2016. This makes the protection of the company a matter of the greatest concern for the entire US financial elite. Shares of Boeing have tripled since the election, making it the highest priced stock in the Dow Jones index. From November 2016 through last Friday, when Boeing stock surpassed \$422 a share, the Dow added 7,000 points, and Boeing’s rise accounted for more than 30 percent of the increase.

In the aftermath of the Ethiopian crash, Boeing stock fell

5.3 percent on Monday and another 6.1 percent on Tuesday. Even so, it is up 25 percent year-to-date. It has doubled since the beginning of last year. Under the cost-cutting drive and aggressive marketing overseen by CEO Muilenburg, Boeing set company records for earnings, cash flow and commercial deliveries in 2017 and pledged to do better.

It is the United States’ biggest single exporter, which makes it a central player in Trump’s trade war policy. Trump has repeatedly hailed Muilenburg, who has returned the praise.

During his recent trip to Hanoi, Trump posed for a photo with the Boeing CEO to celebrate a new order from a Vietnamese airline that included 100 737 Max jets.

And if Boeing is central to US imperialism’s global ambitions as well as the fortunes of the country’s banks, hedge funds and speculators, the 737 Max 8 is critical to the success of Boeing. It is the century-old company’s best-selling plane ever. It accounts for almost a third of Boeing’s operating profit. It is estimated that a full halt to deliveries could cost the company \$5.1 billion, or 5 percent of annual revenue, within two months.

As of January, Boeing had more than 5,000 orders for the various versions of the 737 Max. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, analysts estimate that the Max 8 represents two-thirds of Boeing’s future deliveries and 40 percent of its profits. As far as the American ruling elite is concerned, it must be protected at all costs!

These facts point to the fundamental irrationality of capitalist private ownership of the airline industry and the division of the world market into hostile and competing national camps. It is a system that is incompatible with the provision of safe, affordable and comfortable air travel for the entire population.

The latest tragic and preventable air crash is further proof of the urgent need to expropriate the corporate ruling elite and transform the major corporations into public utilities operated under the democratic control of the working class so as to satisfy human need, not private profit.

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