Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

Pilots, attendants warn on safety

Under attack by the airlines' creditors, employees are publicly warning that safety has deteriorated beyond acceptable limits.

In an unprecedented action, brought about by "the pilots' concern over the reduced standards of safety since the airlines were deregulated in 1979," the pilots of United Airlines on Feb. 25 passed a "vote of no confidence" in United's flight management policy. The Master Executive Council, leadership arm of the 6,000 United pilots who belong to the Air Line Pilots Association, denounced United for its new policy "of merely meeting the minimum standards as set by Federal Aviation Administration regulations."

The council also revealed that United recently petitioned the FAA to have certain minimum standards reduced. Roger Hall, chairman of the council, said, "Considering the safety record of the airline industry this past year, the pilots of United believe safety standards should be raised, not lowered. This is an absolute necessity to insure the safety of the traveling public."

This striking development occurred in the context of the greatest turmoil in the nation's airline industry since deregulation. Two major airlines, TWA and Eastern, are embroiled in bitter disputes with their unions over cutbacks being forced by the depression conditions in the industry.

Eastern Airlines attendants, who settled on a new three-year contract on Friday, Feb. 28, narrowly avoiding a strike, have also denounced their airline for safety violations. New austerity-driven working conditions are "the greatest threat to safety," Eastern Transport Workers Union spokesman Cathy Nelson told a Chicago press conference the day before the settlement. Under new work rules imposed by the company, she said, flight attendants are working up to 18 hours a day and spending, in many cases, more than 25 continuous days away from home.

The Eastern attendants accepted a new accord including 20% pay cuts, reduced vacation and benefits, and more flight hours. The mitigating factor in the contract was the company's agreement to rehire many of the 1,010 attendants laid off in February when the company moved to prevent liquidation by its more than 60 banking creditors.

Trans World Airlines attendants are heading toward a possible strike in early March. Like their Eastern counterparts, the TWA attendants have offered to take a 15% wage cut, but new TWA chairman Carl Icahn has demanded a 22% wage cut and a 23% benefit cut too, a condition the attendants have so far refused.

Icahn, one of the nation's leading "asset-strippers" (financiers who "save" companies by selling off their tangible assets) said that a successful strike might force him to "dismantle" the airline and sell the pieces. "I expect to be able to operate TWA with or without a settlement" with the attendants, Icahn told the press. TWA has trained about 1,500 reservations clerks to replace the attendants, and plans to hire 1,500 additional attendants in the event of a strike.

The nation's airlines are victims of the vicious "free enterprise" vise created by the twin pressures of deregulation and high interest rates. Eastern's plight is paradigmatic. Eastern Airlines holds a debt of $2.5 billion. When deregulation hit in 1978, the airline attempted to cut costs by modernizing. It was forced to incur debt at Paul Volcker's stratospheric interest rates, and today pays $250 million a year in interest to its American and European creditors, led by Chase Manhattan Bank and Citicorp.

To ensure payment on that debt, the banks installed their chief "asset-stripper," Texas Air Chairman Frank Lorenzo, as new CEO at Eastern in late February. Lorenzo is a close friend of Chase Manhattan president and Trilateral Commission founder David Rockefeller. Mere mention of Lorenzo's name, so hated and feared by the unions, forced a quick settlement with all but the machinists, who refused to open their 1987 contract to renegotiation, as the banks demanded. Lorenzo last year purchased the bankrupt Continental Airlines, put it through Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization, and ripped up its union contracts.

The brutal treatment of the nation's airlines workers has ramifications not only for union members. The breakdown in what most Americans have considered to be untouchable safety standards is the direct result of the bankers' determination to break the airline unions and cut costs.

The fare war that has already begun as a result of Eastern's buyout by Lorenzo may bring airline passengers a few dollars in immediate savings. Its long-term effect, however, will be further cannibalization of the airlines' infrastructure, greater sacrifices demanded of the already-stretched workforce, and, necessarily, a rapidly declining safety situation for the nation's airline passengers.