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Aftermath of
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New York Airline Workers in the Aftermath of 9/11

A year after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, 54 percent of airline workers in the metropolitan New York area who were displaced remain unemployed. Overall, unemployment in the New York region remains high, at 7.4 percent, and recent data shows that approximately 40 percent of those laid off after 9/11 are still without work, but this is a far lower proportion than persists for the region's airline workers. This report explores the situation of unemployment among these airlines workers and documents some of their social and psychological experiences since the original terrorist attack.

Although billions of dollars in federal aid have been allocated to assist the airlines affected by the terrorist attack, displaced airline workers have generally failed to benefit so far from this assistance. At this writing, their extended unemployment benefits are about to terminate and economic hardship for many will increase. In its final section, the report offers some evaluation of formal efforts initiated since 9/11, which are designed to assist displaced airline workers and their families.

A collaboration of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, funded by The Fiscal Policy Institute, this report is based on a sample survey of 609 airline workers from United and TWA/American Airlines, who lost their jobs after 9/11 or who lost their opportunities for recall at existing levels of seniority because of the events. The study also draws on longer, in-depth interviews conducted with unemployed airlines personnel at locations where they seek job counseling and training. The survey was sent to approximately 1800 employees of United and TWA/American in the New York Metropolitan region, who are members of the machinists' union, and who lost their jobs after 9/11. The sample represents 34% of the approximately 1800 International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers who were known to have lost their jobs or were unable to be re-assigned to new jobs, as a consequence of the terrorist attacks on New York City. The sample can be interpreted with confidence intervals of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Respondents were asked about current employment status and the economic and psychosocial consequences of the layoffs, as well as questions about what, if any, assistance they have received since the layoffs. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to write additional comments about how their lives have changed since 9/11, and over half the sample elected to do so and representative quotes from their writing are included in the report.

Table 1: What carrier did you work for?		
	Frequency	Percent
TWA/American	438	71.9
United	167	27.4
No Response	4	0.7
Total	609	100

Seventy two percent of the respondents worked for TWA/American Airlines, and twenty eight percent for United (Table 1). All those sampled were members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, AFL-CIO, and were primarily employed in blue collar and service capacities with the airlines, although flight crew personnel are represented by a sub-sample of flight attendants. About one fifth are mechanics, another fifth are in reservations and customer services, approximately twelve percent are ground fleet service personnel, and "others" (40%) are distributed in a variety of occupations, of which baggage handlers, ramp security, flight attendants, cleaners, and clerical employees are the largest categories (see Table 2).

Table 2: What is your occupation?		
Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Mechanic	126	24.2
Fleet Service	64	12.3
Customer Service	113	21.7
Reservation	14	2.7
Other*	203	39.0
Total	520	100

Catastrophic Unemployment and its Immediate Consequences

The most severe and immediate consequences of the sudden layoffs, after loss of income, were loss of medical benefits and health insurance, and the threat of loss of their homes. Forty seven percent (47%) of the airlines workers who lost jobs after 9/11 lost health insurance, largely because they paid into relatively expensive COBRA plans until finding other employment. But 27 percent were without any health insurance for some months, and 26 percent remain without any health insurance since 9/11(See Table 3).

Table 3: Current employment status, number of jobs held since layoffs, and loss of health insurance, by Airline

Current employment	Carrier		Total	
	TWA/American	United	#	%
Unemployed	61.5%*	34.1	315	53.8
Waiting for recall	21.6	20.7	125	21.4
But working				
Recalled	7.6	43.3	103	17.6
Retired	6.2	---	15	4.4
How Likely do you believe it is that you will be recalled?				
Already recalled	11.8	50.7	103	23.9
Highly likely	9.8	11.9	45	10.4
Very Likely	14.5	10.4	57	13.2
Somewhat likely	31.3	17.2	116	26.9
Not at all likely	32.7	9.7	110	25.5
How Many Jobs have you had since the layoffs?				
None	71.0	62.8	394	68.6
One or two	28.3	36.0	175	30.5
Three or more	0.7	1.2	5	0.9
After the layoffs, how long were you without health insurance?				
I never lost it	42.5	56.0	267	46.4
Was without coverage, now have it	27.6	27.1	158	27.5
Still no health insurance	29.8	16.9	150	26.1

* Some columns do not add to 100% due to non-responses

Workers of minority status were more likely than non-minority workers to be without health insurance. 21 percent of white workers said they were still without health insurance, while 39 percent of African Americans and 37 percent of Latinos said they "still do not have health coverage." Differences among men and women were negligible.

Severe disruption of family home lives -- particularly the need to move to less expensive apartments, or inability to keep up with mortgage payments and subsequent loss of their private homes, or the fear of losing their homes soon -- is a major consequence of the terrorist attacks and subsequent layoffs. Respondents were asked: "Since the layoffs, have you had to move your home because of financial reasons?" Thirteen percent said they were forced to give up their homes, and thirty one percent said they have not yet had to do so, but fear that any day they will not be able to meet home payments and will be forced to move (see Table 4).

Table 4: Since the layoff, have you had to move your home because of financial reasons?		
	#	%
Yes	75	12
No	322	56
May be forced to do so soon	179	31
Total	576	99%*
*Does not add to 100% due to rounding error and non-responses		

"I had to move to a smaller and less expensive house," one former American airlines employee wrote, "With two kids in college it has been a challenge... I had to change my life style drastically. Unemployment insurance helps, but it is not enough! All in all, I am anxiously awaiting my recall..."

Employees in less secure, less well-paid airline occupations were most likely to have been forced to move after the layoffs (21 percent of reservations clerks, 21 percent of baggage handlers and related occupations, as opposed to 7% of airline mechanics). But mechanics, the most skilled among the union members in the sample, were the most likely to fear losing their homes in the near future (41 percent versus 31 percent for the entire sample, see Appendix Table II-18).

The vast majority of displaced airlines workers said their family and marital lives had suffered since the layoffs. Sixty eight percent (68%) said their family lives were worse since September 2001 and 51 percent said their marital or other significant relationships were weaker than before the events. Not surprisingly, large proportions of the displaced workers also said they were experiencing a variety of physical and emotional conditions usually associated with increased stress and financial insecurity.

Since the layoffs, displaced airlines workers in the sample said they experienced the following changes in their health status:

High Blood Pressure	27%
Chest or heart problems	17%
Stomach or digestive problems	47%
Sleep problems, insomnia	68%
Other medical problems	30%

Among the "other" medical problems reported, the most common is severe depression. Scores of written comments on the survey form attest to this finding. A former baggage handler writes:

My wife and I don't even talk to one another sweet, gentle or with kindness any more. She calls me names (loser!) and I am depressed and pretty much discouraged with myself.... When I'm alone in the house or in the car I go into tears thinking how my life just went into shambles. My Manhood, my Fatherhood, my Dignity was taken away from me all because of many reasons: Like the 9-11-01 incident ... TWA couldn't keep up with competition and poor management for the last 20 years.

Respondents repeatedly noted that their struggles and their bouts of depression are worsened by the neglect and indifference they have experienced on the part of their former employers. "I am very disappointed and sad with American Airlines and T.W.A.," wrote a former reservation clerk,

Since I got laid-off on Oct. the first, I have not received a single letter from them updating me or my friends that also got laid-off or any situation, or any programs of ways of helping us. It is true that lots of people lost their lives on Sept 11, but we lost our jobs, our homes and we are struggling very hard to get back on our feet, but it is very hard. At least AA should send us a letter updating us of the situation and if ever they are going to call us back.

Nor are those who remain unemployed the only airline workers who are experiencing extremely negative consequences of the terrorist attacks and subsequent crisis in the airline industry. Flight attendants in the sample, for example, who were called back report far higher levels of stress and fear on the job than they ever experienced before. But the greatest stress and disruption among those workers who regained their employment after 9/11 is reported by former American and TWA employees in the New York region who were assigned to jobs in American's St. Louis hub airport. Here is a typical comment from a woman whose husband also works for American:

The single biggest change is that nothing remains the same. My job is different; I no longer live in the same home (due to eviction from sale of the premises). My husband had to go to St. Louis to keep his job. I was recalled by American in New York. So I currently am not living with my husband. I was living with my husband in St. Louis when I was recalled. I requested a delay in recall by American Airlines, but I was denied. So little attention has been given to the ways life has been disrupted for people since Sept. 11, particularly TWA employees. So many families are now living apart, largely due to the buyout, which was further impacted by Sept. 11. No one in particular, especially American Airlines, cares about the emotional toll on human lives.

Many of the displaced workers are also suffering from the direct traumatic effects of the terrorist events themselves, although it appears that there has been little formal assessment of this situation to date. A veteran United Airlines mechanic's written note is typical of this segment of the sample:

Since after September 11, 2001, the single biggest change in my life was that I was lost, began drinking alcohol to ease my mind, but couldn't take my mind off what I had seen on TV, especially when I found out that the United Airlines plane that hit the World Trade Center (plane #6212) I had worked on it so many times. I couldn't concentrate on my family life, my marriage, my child, and I lost the nice rented apartment and many more things, which are too numerous to list on this paper. IT STILL HURTS.

Job Placement and The Duration of Unemployment

Unless they are near retirement age, the more time workers have spent on a job, the longer they tend to hold out hope -- often fruitless -- that they can regain their employment at the company which laid them off (assuming the companies remain in business. This would appear to be especially true of displaced airline workers in the New York metropolitan area whose skills are less transferable to other occupational settings. Nearly 64 percent of mechanics who were displaced reported that they were still unemployed at the time of the survey, while 93 percent of reservations clerks, an occupation with far less transferable skills, remained unemployed.

Workers who have invested significant stretches of their lives in a job and a workplace experience loss of seniority, loss of their occupational communities (friendships at work), and loss of pension and other benefits more severely than those with a few years on the job. Among the displaced airlines workers in this survey, only about thirty six percent had been on the job less than ten years, and thirty four percent had been at their jobs for twenty years or more. Younger workers tend to experiment more with temporary jobs and engage more quickly in job training or educational programs. In contrast, workers nearest retirement age tend to be the most pessimistic about their chances on the open labor market.

Among the displaced airline workers surveyed, members of this oldest cohort (many of whom have lost their seniority rights of recall) are most likely to feel superannuated and without options. Thus only nineteen percent of workers between 18-29 believe it is "not at all likely" they will be recalled by a major airline, while 49 percent of workers over the age of 55 said it was "not at all likely they would be recalled."

The vast majority (70 percent) of respondents are dissatisfied with the

information they have received concerning job openings in the airline industry, and 63 percent are dissatisfied with information about jobs available in others sectors of the economy which they might qualify for. This finding does not vary appreciably by occupation, education, gender, or race and ethnicity (see Table 5).

Table 5: Satisfaction with unemployment benefits and services		
	% Dissatisfied	% Satisfied
Satisfaction with amount of severance or layoff benefits from company	42.7	29.1*
Satisfaction with information about jobs available in other economic sectors	70.2	8.1
Satisfaction with continuation of health benefits provided by Company	65.2	20.7
Satisfaction with placement services in helping with job search	57.8	6.8

*Rows do not add to 100% due to non-responses or respondents who said they "don't know."

Those workers who have found temporary or potentially permanent employment, either with other airlines, or in new sectors of the labor market, often mentioned that available counseling was helpful, and that job fairs were useful. But since their employment prospects have remained bleak since their layoffs after 9/11, negative attitudes toward job placement efforts are not surprising.

Unemployed airline personnel whom we have interviewed in the One Stop Center in Jamaica, Queens, where they receive job counseling, job readiness training, and job referrals, and where they can meet and talk with other displaced airlines workers, are more likely to say that there are employment channels they can explore and help they can reach for. But the majority of respondents in the larger sample express their frustration with assistance efforts since the terrorist attacks. As a former customer service worker noted:

I also see how much employers don't sympathize or put in place better programs for their employees when emergency situations arise which may affect the world. My finances have been devastated, especially since I am a single parent!! We as a country need to learn to take care of one another with a little more concern, care, and compassion. We all need each other when it gets to the heart of all matters.

Over and over on the survey, displaced airline workers say their meager emergency benefits are reaching termination while the airlines have received billions of dollars and are requesting further billions from government funds for 9/11 disaster relief. As this is written, these displaced workers feel increasingly isolated, abandoned, and angry.

Conclusion

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States using the commercial aircraft of American Airlines and United Airlines. Today, a little over a year later, the airline industry is reporting record losses approaching \$8 billion. As a direct result of the terrorist attack, thousands of airline workers were displaced from their jobs. In this study of airline workers in the New York metropolitan area, 54% of those displaced remain unemployed.

Urgent action is required to minimize further hardship for airline workers and to stabilize the airline industry. With unemployment insurance expired for most displaced airline workers, extending federal assistance immediately is needed. With COBRA benefits soon to expire, most of these displaced workers and their families will soon join thousands of others without health insurance.

The economic recovery in New York as well as the country depends in large part in the confidence of Americans to travel, whether for business or pleasure. Restoring that confidence includes assisting those airline workers who have lost their jobs due to the September 11 attack. This study documents the human toll of these job losses to airline workers. For the sake of New York and the country, we urge immediate action.