



PERFECT STORM: Southwest Airlines cancels over 2,400 flights as pilots pursue SICKOUT revolt against vaccine mandates

Description

USA: Southwest Airlines canceled more than 2,400 flights over the weekend through Tuesday, Oct. 12, disrupting the travel plans of thousands of its customers and stranding flight crews in the process. The airline has blamed the meltdown of its operations on a combination of [bad weather, air traffic control issues and shortage of available staff](#). Insider sources, however, explain that what's actually happening is an organic "sickout" protest among pilots who reject vaccine mandates and the coercion being used to push them.

Pilots say that the weekend cancellations reflected longer-running fatigue and frustration among its crew, leaving the company vulnerable to further outages. Southwest became operational again on Tuesday. The airline [canceled roughly 1,900 flights on Saturday and Sunday](#) and another 435 on Monday. It also canceled 91 flights on Tuesday, or two percent of its schedule.

The Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA), which represents the company's more than 9,000 pilots, has blamed the management's poor planning for the flight cancellations. The union has raised alarms since summer that pilots were stretched thin by frequent reassignments that led to longer workdays and extended trips.

Southwest pilots oppose vaccine mandate

The relationship between Southwest and SWAPA has been strained in recent months as the airline allegedly made unilateral changes to working conditions last year as a response to the pandemic. The union has updated a suit to include an [objection to the company's implementation of a vaccine mandate](#). It also seeks a temporary restraining order to block the mandate, as well as other policies.

Staffing problems usually add to the burden of workers in companies and have become increasingly common across industries, from restaurants to manufacturing to healthcare. Asking workers to stay up late or pick extra shifts could risk staff burnout and resignations.

Some of Southwest's pilots have said that the constant prospect of being rerouted or being uncertain

about the length of their trips could contribute to their reluctance to pick up extra flights. According to the union, pilots did cover the majority of the trips that were left open due to staffing issues over the weekend.

Severe weather in Florida and air traffic control issues that slowed traffic in the area on Friday night, Oct. 8, were the immediate trigger to the weekend's problems, according to Southwest. Somehow, the same weather did not affect other airlines, however.

Official reason for canceled flights: lack of available crew

The airline has had to reassign trips, which burned through the on-call staff. But the lack of available crew has remained as the official reason for the canceled flights. (Related: [Southwest Airlines "sickout" protest spreads to Amtrak, which is canceling trains due to employees refusing covid "vaccination."](#))

The airline had no immediate comment on the union's concerns about future outages. Executives say they recognize the need for more staffing "cushion" to insulate operations from unexpected shocks. However, they would have to consider cutting more flights in the next two months to avoid problems.

The flight cancellations are only the latest in the challenges that the company had to face as air travel accelerated since COVID-19 vaccines became widely available in the United States. In June, technical problems prompted Southwest to cancel hundreds of flights and delay hundreds more.

Airline companies have set ambitious new schedules to meet the rising demand for air travel, but have stretched their resources thin. Southwest has reduced its packed flight schedule coming into the fall to alleviate the problems it saw over the summer. "We were thinly staffed coming into the weekend, and that certainly didn't help things as we were trying to recover," says Southwest Chief Executive Gary Kelly.

By Mary Villareal

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