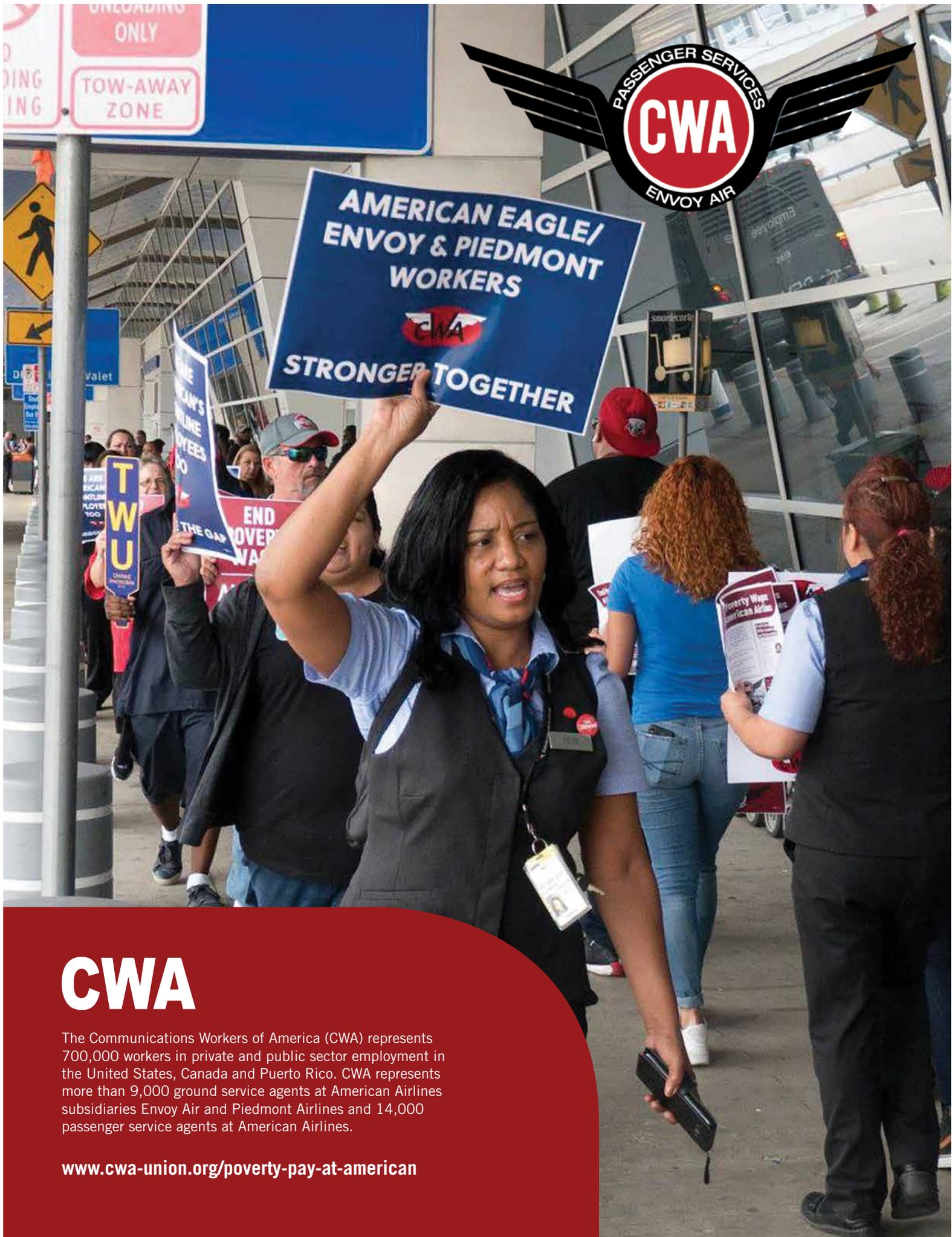


# Hazards on the Ground at American Airlines

Survey of ground service agents at American-owned Envoy Air reveals dangerous time pressures and inadequate protections from safety risks

envoy





# CWA

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) represents 700,000 workers in private and public sector employment in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. CWA represents more than 9,000 ground service agents at American Airlines subsidiaries Envoy Air and Piedmont Airlines and 14,000 passenger service agents at American Airlines.

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# Hazards on the Ground at American Airlines

*Survey of ground service agents at American-owned Envoy Air reveals dangerous time pressures and inadequate protections from safety risks*

## Executive summary: Envoy Air workers on the frontlines

Envoy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of American Airlines, the largest passenger airline in the United States. Envoy employs more than 8,000 passenger and fleet service agents whose responsibilities include keeping passengers safe and ensuring planes depart on time. Envoy agents work at some of the biggest and busiest airports in the country as well as smaller regional airports that connect flyers to travel destinations around the country.

Agents help support safe and smooth departures, including managing pre-flight check-in, screening baggage for weight, and deescalating tense situations with passengers. They also work on the runway ramp loading and unloading baggage, guiding planes on the tarmac, deicing planes, supplying potable water, removing lavatory waste, and ensuring aircraft are inspected and safe before takeoff.

Despite agents' important role ensuring safe, efficient air travel, ground service workers at American Airlines' regional subsidiary Envoy Air (branded as American Eagle) face serious safety risks on the job due to unreasonable time pressure, understaffing, and other factors including low wages and long hours. Safety issues impacting agents, including rushed inspections and the inability to complete security protocols under conflicting time pressure demands, should raise red flags for the flying public about the need for Envoy Air to improve working conditions.

This report explores evidence of these safety risks, drawing on a nationwide survey of 800 Envoy workers, data from company injury logs, inspections by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and other sources.

The survey was conducted by the agents' union, the Communications Workers of America (CWA). The findings underscore evidence of chronic understaffing and time pressure, inadequate support for high flight volumes, and safety concerns on the runway and at the gate. Major findings include:

- » Nearly eighty percent (79%) of survey participants report feeling rushed to do their jobs during all or most shifts. Seventy-six percent of agents cite understaffing as the top one or two reasons for feeling rushed, and 70% of agents report experiencing understaffing during all or most of their shifts.
- » Seventy-four percent of respondents rated demanding flight schedules and delays/cancellations as the top one or two contributing factor causing time pressure.
- » Nearly half (47%) of agents who work on the runway ramp report they are unable to complete every required damage inspection of aircrafts, many citing time pressure and understaffing.
- » A majority (51%) of agents on the runway ramp report working with defective equipment during all or most shifts.
- » Fifty-eight percent of agents who do aircraft cabin searches for contraband or other risks before flights do not have enough time to complete the search.

Envoy workers also submitted hundreds of first-hand testimonials as part of the survey, describing mental and physical strain caused by the work environment.

## COMPANY PROFILE:

# American Airlines and its subsidiary Envoy Air

# envoy

Envoy Air is a wholly-owned subsidiary of American Airlines, the largest passenger airline in the United States. Envoy operates nearly 1,000 daily flights under the “American Eagle” banner and serves 150 destinations.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, regional routes and operations have become an increasingly crucial element of both American’s business and the broader commercial aviation industry. Across the entire sector, regional flights increased from 16 percent of domestic departures in the year 2000 to 45 percent in 2016.<sup>2</sup> At American, regional subsidiaries operated 53 percent of American’s domestic departures in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The company posted \$1.9 billion in profits for FY2017 and five years after its merger with US Airways, CEO Doug Parker says the company is immune to the steep losses of pre-consolidation years.<sup>4</sup> Despite rising oil prices, American reported healthy profits in the first three quarters of 2018 and anticipates \$1 billion in new revenue from various initiatives in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Like many of the largest corporations in America, the company will realize benefits from the “Tax Cuts and Jobs Act,” changes to the tax code that American – through its lobbying arm – supported and said would “spur a new era of job growth and economic development.”<sup>6</sup> The company anticipates tax refunds of \$170 million in 2019 and 2020 as a result of the repeal of the Corporate Alternative Minimum Tax.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the airline is not a cash taxpayer and will not be for several more years due to its 2011 bankruptcy.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of investing its \$170 million tax windfall in American workers, the company has announced \$2 billion in stock buybacks. The latest stock buybacks come on the heels of \$11.5 billion in buybacks over the past four years.<sup>9</sup>

## Low-wages and high turnover at Envoy Air contribute to stress

Despite the growing importance of regionals to American’s operations, the airport-based workers at Envoy Air who service those flights are underpaid and undervalued, creating a high level of stress that contributes to unsafe conditions.

Starting pay at Envoy is \$9.48 an hour, and more than half of the agents make less than \$11 an hour. A recent report shows that 27% must rely on public assistance to get by, and many are forced to go to extreme measures to cover basic living expenses, including selling plasma, buying out-of-date food and borrowing against retirement accounts.<sup>10</sup> An additional 60% of agents rely on family and friends to get by, and only 13% say their wages are enough to support them.

- » The stress of long hours and poverty wages contributes to high turnover and an unsafe environment, where workers are pushed to meet intense deadlines to get planes out on time. Agents have described working sixty hour weeks just to make ends meet and the stress and mental fatigue of working multiple double-shifts in a row. Low wages also contribute to a high rate of turnover among Envoy agents – estimated at more than 40% annually.
- » The constant churn of new employees has safety implications, since senior staff must take on an added burden when newer employees are less experienced with safety procedures and may fear asking questions or raising concerns during their six-month probationary period. Three-quarters of Envoy agents report that they work with inexperienced agents during all or most of their shifts, indicating the widespread impact of high turnover on the work environment.
- » The long hours worked by low-wage Envoy agents put them at increased risk of injury and illness. A review of academic studies conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that the risk of experiencing a workplace injury increases dramatically after the 8th or 9th hour at work.<sup>11</sup> Excessive overtime can also increase the risk of heart attacks, with one study showing the risk was increased for those working more than 11 hours per day or more than 60 hours per week in the month before the attack.<sup>12</sup>

## Envoy employees experience preventable injuries on the job

Passenger and fleet service agents face many hazards on the job that require proactive safety measures, adequate staffing, and comprehensive training to prevent injuries. Yet shortfalls in Envoy and American Airlines' approach to safety result in many preventable injuries and a stressful work environment.

The hazards agents face include:

- » Ergonomic risks from repetitive and forceful lifting, pushing, bending and otherwise engaging in strenuous physical activities;
- » Violence and harassment from passengers;
- » Exposure to extreme heat and cold when working on the runway ramp;
- » The risk of falling from heights;
- » The potential for accidents when driving vehicles on the ramp or interacting with heavy equipment and planes;
- » Contact with biologic and chemical agents; and
- » Inconsistent provision of required safety supplies/equipment and adequate protective gear across all stations.

Envoy workers experience hundreds of preventable injuries each year related to the hazards described above.

According to company-maintained OSHA workplace injury and illness logs, there were 1,459 recordable injuries/illnesses across all Envoy employees working at airports during the 21-month period from January 2017 through September of 2018.<sup>13</sup>

Of those injuries, 829 were strains and sprains, a category of injuries often caused by ergonomic hazards and made worse by a high-pressure environment like that at Envoy. In fact, the reported cause of at least 596 injuries was an ergonomic issue: lifting, pushing or pulling, twisting or bending.<sup>14</sup> Other injuries reported in the company logs include 311 bruises, 101 lacerations, 50 fractures, 44 crushings, 16 concussions, 6 instances of heat stroke and 5 dislocations, among others.

OSHA inspections, usually triggered by a worker complaint, severe injury or planned inspection to examine the presence of hazards, give another window into safety hazards at Envoy. From January 2008 to September 2018, OSHA inspected Envoy work sites

on twenty-six occasions. Ten of those inspections resulted in citations that included violations of OSHA standards.<sup>15</sup>

In one case recorded in January of 2017 at the Little Rock airport, a worker suffered a serious cut to his thumb caused by a protruding piece of a metal hose clamp attached to an improperly repaired water hose. At the time of the accident, the worker was using an airplane blanket wrapped around his hand as makeshift protection. This injury could have been prevented if Envoy provided appropriate work gloves for employees and if the defective water hose had been repaired correctly. After slicing open his thumb, the worker looked for a first aid kit, but no bandages or other first aid supplies were available; instead he used paper towels to contain the bleeding.<sup>16</sup>

The worker continued to work through his shift after the injury because a supervisor, unaware of the proper procedures when an employee is injured, suggested that he would be disciplined by getting an attendance point on his record for leaving to get medical care, negatively impacting his eventual health outcome. After the employee worked with his union to file an OSHA complaint, OSHA cited Envoy and proposed penalties totaling \$70,831, which were negotiated down to



\$9,000 in an informal settlement. While Envoy was not charged for violations related to the injury itself, the company was found to have violated a section of the OSHA standard relating to the maintenance of powered industrial trucks.<sup>17</sup>

In another case reported in November of 2015 at Des Moines International Airport, a worker sustained an injury that resulted in an amputation. Inspectors found that Envoy violated a standard requiring employers document the process of servicing machines or equipment with multiple power sources. If the machine or equipment cannot be completely isolated from these power sources, the machine can store residual energy, which creates severe hazards for employees. Envoy fought the citations, but eventually reached a formal settlement and paid a penalty of \$1,875.<sup>18</sup>

In a third case recorded in April of 2012 at Chicago O'Hare, Envoy violated the general duty standard, which requires employers to provide working environments "free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm." In this instance, Envoy neglected to ensure that self-supporting ladders were used for their single purpose, resulting in a risk that employees could fall from a height of 10 feet. Envoy paid a penalty of \$2,700 following an informal settlement.<sup>19</sup>

The number of injuries at Envoy is highly concerning, and because of several factors may be just a small window into a larger number of injuries flying under the radar. Under-reporting is common, particularly of work-related musculoskeletal disorders caused by ergonomic risks. Further, OSHA only requires that certain types of injuries and illnesses be recorded, leaving out categories such as near misses that could indicate the presence of safety hazards, harassment and threats of violence by passengers, and injuries and illnesses related to stress.

Agents may themselves fail to report injuries due to management intimidation and the fear of retaliation and job loss, or simply because of the speed and demands of their work, which makes agents reluctant or unable to stop what they are doing to make a report and risk delaying a flight in the process.

The passenger airline industry overall has a high rate of injuries, with 6.6 injuries per 100 full time equivalent workers in 2017, compared to 2.8 injuries per 100 workers across all private industry.<sup>20</sup> The industry also had the seventh-highest rate of nonfatal injuries and illnesses that resulted in days away from work, restricted work activity or job transfer in 2017.<sup>21</sup>

## SURVEY FINDINGS:

### **Envoy workers report intense time pressure, inadequate staffing, and a management culture that cuts corners to maintain an on-time schedule**

A new survey of 800 Envoy agents at 88 airports across the country provides evidence of serious safety risks from understaffing and time pressures that force workers to cut corners in order to get planes out on time and avoid discipline. The survey was conducted between December 3 and 14, 2018. Survey respondents work in a mix of roles, including inside the airport (39%), outside on the ramp (23%), or both inside and outside at smaller stations (38%).

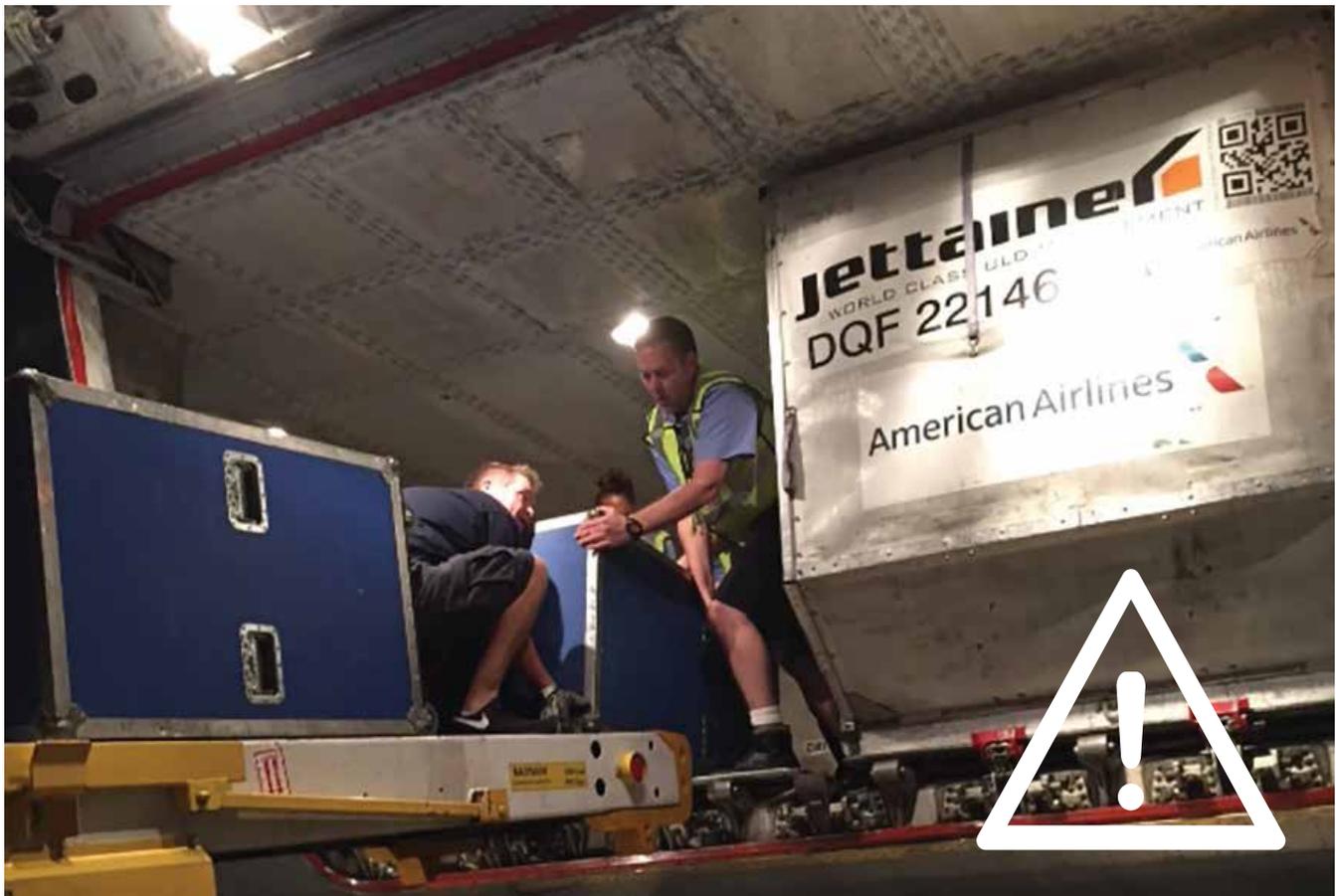
The survey shows that a driving concern among agents is severe understaffing, which puts pressure on agents to move too quickly and make tough decisions that increase stress and sometimes risk injury. Among all survey respondents, 79% report feeling rushed to do their jobs during all or most shifts. Seventy-six percent of agents cite understaffing as the top one or two reasons for feeling rushed and 70% of agents report experiencing understaffing during all or most of their shifts. Overall, 63% of agents believe that understaffing is a very serious issue at their station, and another 29% believe it is a somewhat serious issue.

Agents also report demanding flight schedules and delays/cancellations as major factors causing time pressure, with 74% of agents rating one of those as a top one or two contributing factor. American's effort to achieve a high volume of flights with inadequate staff support has resulted in a system that puts extreme pressure on ground service agents to rush through their jobs or face discipline.

Agents overwhelmingly feel they face the threat of discipline if they do not hit deadlines to get flights out on time, with 53% of respondents reporting a strong risk of discipline and an additional 35% reporting some risk of discipline if deadlines are not met.

For agents who work on the runway ramp, safety concerns include the following:

- » Nearly half (47%) of agents report that they are unable to complete all required walk-arounds



of aircraft when they arrive or depart to inspect for damage. Agents report that time pressure and understaffing were the top two reasons for being unable to complete the inspections.

- » A majority of agents (51%) report that they work with defective equipment during all or most shifts. The types of equipment that are frequently operated with broken parts or other problems include: belt loaders, tugs, bag carts, and lavatory trucks or carts.
- » Nearly half of agents (46%) report they frequently do not have time to inspect a vehicle before using it, as required by safety protocol.
- » Nearly one quarter (23%) of agents report they are unable to take defective equipment out of service if it poses a safety risk and must instead wait for a supervisor to do so. Among these agents, 33% say that supervisors do not reliably take the defective equipment out of service to be repaired.
- » A large number of agents also report that they are pressured to load and unload bags too quickly, resulting in higher safety risks.

For gate and ticket agents, safety concerns include:

- » Many agents feel pressure to skip proper bag sizing protocol for over-sized carry-on bags, which impacts the weight and balance of the aircraft, a safety concern for passengers and crew alike. Forty-nine percent report skipping this procedure between once and several times per flight, citing avoidance of delay as the biggest driving factor.
- » Among agents who do aircraft cabin searches to ensure there is no contraband or other risks aboard before flights, 58.1% report they do not have enough time to conduct the search thoroughly.

The breadth and severity of workers' concerns touch on every aspect of the boarding and departure process, and indicate Envoy is stretching its frontline staff far past their ability to ensure safe, efficient air travel. Envoy should correct the issues of time pressure and understaffing to support workers in carrying out required safety protocols and job tasks without risk of injury or harm to themselves and passengers.

## WORKER TESTIMONIALS:

# Agents report a high toll of mental and physical strain from Envoy's high-pressure environment

Hundreds of workers wrote testimonials about the impact of the high-pressure work environment on their physical and mental health.

### • Long hours and low pay

“Overall working at the airport mentally drains you and when we have to work overtime almost every day just to make ends meet is very unsafe. The company will not allow people to work 7 consecutive days but will allow me to work six 16-hour shifts in a row. What sense does that make?”

—Agent with three years' experience at Tallahassee International Airport in Florida

“Because we don't make enough money there is always a need for more. So we have to work 2 other jobs to make end[s] meet. Which makes you tired and not as alert. Then it becomes a safety issue...”

—Agent with less than six months' experience at Shreveport Regional Airport in Louisiana

### • Stress and Fear of Discipline

“This is by far the most mentally stressful environment I have ever worked in.”

—Agent with two years' experience at Charleston International Airport in South Carolina

“I feel I have to be ready to defend my actions if I take a delay due to safety reasons.”

—Agent with more than ten years' experience at Key West International Airport in Florida

“Pressure for on-time departures is so immense that being a nervous wreck and questioning safety is a constant, daily thing.”

—Agent with more than ten years' experience at Rick Husband Amarillo International Airport in Texas



### • Injuries and Illnesses

“I've already seen other employees getting cuts and bruises yet [they are] unreported. I've experienced bruises, cuts, falls and torn rotator cuffs but [am] afraid to report it because [of the] everyday reminder that we are easily replaceable.”

—Agent with one year experience at Appleton International Airport in Wisconsin

“[W]e are regularly put in the position to work unsafe. I tore my rotator cuff due to heavy bags [and] no team lift during rushed turns, then subsequently fell over an extension cord stretched across a doorway reinjuring my shoulder to the point of surgery.”

—Agent with four years experience at Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport in Little Rock, Arkansas

“I am depressed, honestly, I do so much for such little pay. I got a sprain and as soon as I felt better I started working again. The physical part of this job caused me to get a chronic sprain.”

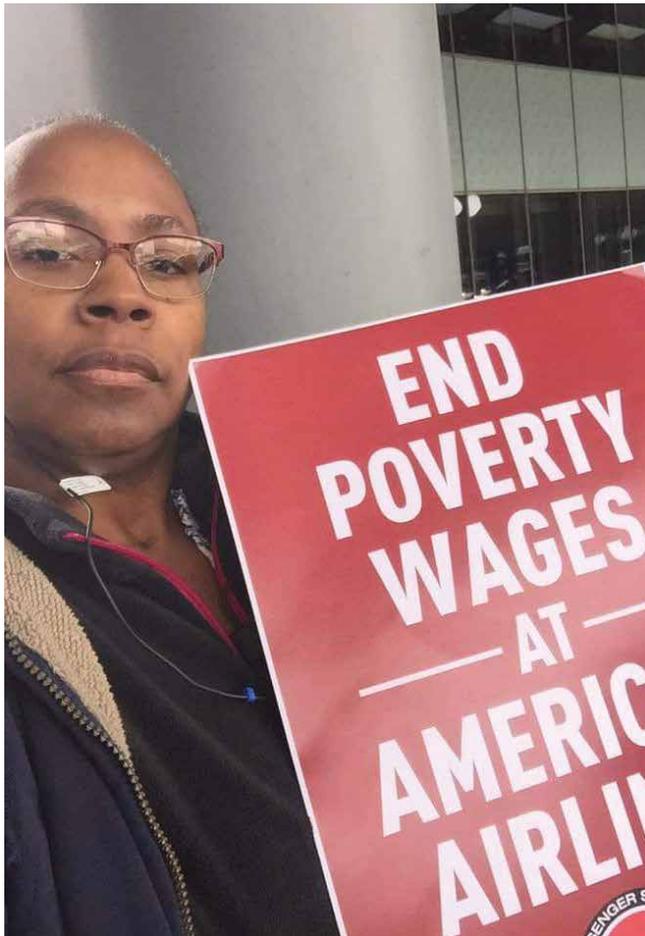
—Agent with less than a year experience at Miami International Airport in Florida

“People are having back, shoulder, groin, knee and other injuries. Many are unreported. The high stress, and back-to-back flights under time constraints and getting flights out on time is what the company cares about. Safety is not first.”

—Agent with less than a year experience at Greater Rochester International Airport in New York

- **Understaffing**

“My station is understaffed to a point of insanity. The number of open hour shifts we have to pick up as part time employees is ridiculous. We are overworked and over



exhausted, which makes for a very dangerous combination.”

—Agent with one year experience at Dane County Regional Airport in Madison, Wisconsin

“The whole scheduling of employees and never knowing whether you have 2 people working a flight or 8. Pulling 50-60 hours a week not by choice really drives you into depression and bad health maintenance. [Agents like me] work all day and night, 5-6 days a week, which takes away any chance of having a life outside of work.”

—Agent with one year experience at Shreveport Regional Airport in Louisiana

“I’m mentally exhausted from days where I work gates, clean the plane [without assistance], board passengers onto the plane, throwing on a vest, going down the jetbridge to help the ramp, going back up, pull the jet bridge and bolting to the next gate where my next flight is, trying to clear standbys, do announcements, cleaning, doing it all over again. I’m always staying late due to being understaffed. I’m physically exhausted from working ramp all the time as well.”

—Agent with less than one year experience at Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport in Bentonville, Arkansas

- **Impact of High Employee Turnover**

“Working with undertrained co-workers is a danger to us all, all day long....which puts stress on our minds and bodies, sets us up for injury and failure.”

—Agent with more than 10 years’ experience at Wichita Dwight Eisenhower National Airport in Kansas

“I am mentally exhausted because I always have to help or do the job for others due to inexperienced/untrained employees. And that also takes a toll on my body when I have to do my work and the work of my co-workers who don’t know, were not trained right, or understaffed.”

—Agent with six years’ experience, San Diego International Airport in California

## • Faulty Equipment

“Constantly having to work with faulty equipment is quickly becoming a nuisance. It’s unsafe and inconvenient to ourselves as well as the passengers.”

— Agent with one year experience at Wichita Falls Regional Airport in Texas

“I am faced with safety concerns daily when it comes to working with equipment that doesn’t function properly due to a lack of maintenance.”

—Agent with one year experience at University of Illinois Willard Airport in Savoy, Illinois

“Too many heavy bags and poorly operating equipment. Always rushing; can’t think clearly sometimes. I have to risk my health daily and worry about time constraints...”

—Agent with four years’ experience at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport in Ohio



## Recommendations

A nationwide survey of Envoy workers, data from company injury logs and OSHA inspections indicate that dangerous time pressure and inadequate protections from safety hazards are leading to preventable injuries on the job and a management culture that cuts corners to get planes out on time. Understaffing, high turnover, poverty wages and long hours contribute to workplace stress and unsafe conditions for ground service agents as well. Envoy Air must correct these issues for the safety of agents and the flying public.

Our recommendations for a safer work environment at Envoy Air:

- » Ensure adequate staffing so agents can get the job done safely *and* on time;
- » Allow workers to report unsafe conditions with no fear of retaliation;
- » Ensure timely repair of defective equipment;
- » Ensure availability of protective gear;
- » Provide adequate training to all agents; and
- » Pay a living wage that would enable agents to work reasonable hours and help lower employee turnover.





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WORKERS  
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**FAMILY  
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