



Sent via email

April 30, 2021

The Honorable Bennie Thompson
Chairman
House Homeland Security Committee
310 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thompson:

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (AFA) represents 50,000 flight attendants across the industry. We offer our strong support for H.R. 903, the Rights for Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Workforce Act of 2021.

Twenty years ago, when TSA was created, Congress wrongfully excluded TSA agents from basic rights and protections afforded to most federal employees. The result has been a shameful separate and unequal system of low pay and inadequate protections for this critical group of public safety employees.

During the pandemic, 7,787 TSA employees have contracted COVID-19 and 16 have lost their lives to the virus.¹ Under the previous Administration, many TSA agents were forced daily into close proximity with hundreds, even thousands, of maskless passengers. Ignoring the advice and guidance of federal health agencies and public health leaders, TSA and the Administration permitted airports to set their own rules for mask-wearing, denied their workers access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and never created a preventative testing system. These constitute a profound and unacceptable failure to address the vulnerabilities of this essential and frontline workforce. The solution is clear. Congress must extend to TSA personnel the equal protections and representation long-denied under federal law.

As aviation's first responders, Flight Attendants depend on the professionalism and expertise of the TSA workforce every day. TSA employees need and deserve a strong voice at work to help promote the best conditions for security of air travel. H.R. 903 ensures full collective bargaining rights for Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) to negotiate for better working conditions, puts TSA officers on the General Schedule pay scale, and provides officers with much needed statutory worker protections against unfair labor practices.

Security is very personal for me. I remember airport security prior to September 11, 2001. I remember the faces of the screeners who allowed terrorists to enter Terminal C at Logan and to board Flight 175. I remember the screeners' faces because they were there all the time, seven days a week, all hours of the day. I remember the sound of their voices, their tired smiles, and the long hours they worked for the lowest bidding security company just so that they could provide for their own families. I often wonder how those security agents have coped with their part in failing to stop the most fatal attack on U.S. soil. Do they understand they were set up to fail?

¹ <https://www.tsa.gov/coronavirus>

Twenty years ago, the decision to federalize airport screening improved aviation security immediately. When AFGE won the largest organizing campaign in the public sector in over 70 years and gave these workers a voice at the agency, our security improved again. My colleagues and I depend on TSOs to keep us safe. We also depend on our union. We know that our union has made flying safer for everyone through constant vigilance, and by giving frontline workers – the people who know the operation – a clear and strong voice in the workplace. Safety and security doesn't just happen; it happens because we demand it of ourselves, demand it of management, and demand it of government.

The unjust decision to exclude TSA from the basic rights and protections of federal employees has produced a workforce that is among the lowest paid and least secure. While TSA's diversity is a cause for celebration—55 percent of the TSA workforce identifies as a racial or ethnic minority²—this makes their exclusion even more problematic, creating yet another disparate treatment, another barrier to advancement for historically-marginalized workers.

We finally note that the drive to win long-denied rights for TSOs aligns with the goals of the newly-formed White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment.³ The first goal of this landmark Task Force is to “lead by example by ensuring that the federal government is a *model employer with respect to encouraging worker organizing and collective bargaining among its workforce* (emphasis added).”⁴ The moment for action has arrived.

AFA applauds your leadership and support for the aviation workforce and pledges to work alongside you and members of this Committee to secure the basic worker rights and protections long denied to Transportation Security Officers.

Respectfully,



Sara Nelson
International President

² <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2020/03/dhs-workforce-is-more-diverse-than-most-but-struggles-to-prime-employees-for-leadership-roles/>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/26/fact-sheet-executive-order-establishing-the-white-house-task-force-on-worker-organizing-and-empowerment/>

⁴ Id.