



Testimony of

Robert Roach, Jr., General Vice President of Transportation

International Association of Machinists

and Aerospace Workers

Before the

Aviation Subcommittee of the Senate Commerce, Science

and Transportation Committee

“Trends in Airline Contract Maintenance”

November 17, 2005

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of this Committee for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Robert Roach, Jr., General Vice President of Transportation for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). I am appearing at the request of International President R. Thomas Buffenbarger. The Machinists Union represents more than 100,000 U.S. airline workers in almost every classification, including Mechanics, Flight Attendants, Ramp Service workers, Public Contact employees.

The U.S. aviation industry is the safest in the world. However we cannot allow ourselves to be complacent. In fact, just the opposite is necessary. We must increase our vigilance in the United States, and honestly assess and diffuse the threat from overseas repair stations.

The financial crisis in the airline industry is well known. Carriers are continually looking for ways to save money, and unfortunately are increasingly looking at their maintenance programs to reduce costs.

Far too often, that means subcontracting maintenance work previously done by an airline's own employees. Unfortunately, without proper oversight the reduction in cost can come with increased risk.

On January 8, 2003 US Airways Express Flight 5481 crashed into a Charlotte, NC hangar packed with IAM members, killing all 21 people on board. The subsequent National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation faulted Air Midwest, which operated the aircraft, the facility that performed maintenance of the aircraft and the FAA.

US Airways, headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, sold the tickets to the flight and the aircraft displayed the carrier's logo. Air Midwest, based in Arizona, operated the flight and was responsible for the aircraft's maintenance. But Air Midwest subcontracted that maintenance to Raytheon Aerospace in Huntington, W.Va.

There, the NTSB determined that a mechanic improperly adjusted cables that helped control the pitch of the aircraft. The mechanic had never done the job on that type of plane before and with his trainer's approval, skipped steps that the NTSB said would likely have helped the mechanic catch his mistakes.

FAA regulations require such flight critical work to be inspected, but in this case it was inspected by the same instructor who allowed steps to be skipped.

NTSB Chairman Ellen Engleman Connors said, “I think the entire system here was broken down. There were errors at every level.”

As the “virtual airline” model gains favor, we must ensure that aircraft maintenance practices are strictly policed, regardless of where they are performed.

A July 2003 report by the Department of Transportation's Inspector General criticized the federal government's inability to adequately police the dramatic increase in out-sourcing by the nation's airlines.

Independent maintenance repair facilities are not the problem. Some are very proficient. But the culture within a company, whether it is an airline-owned facility or an independent company, can lead to poor maintenance practices.

The IAM represents workers at some independent repair facilities, but our collective bargaining agreements help foster maintenance excellence. Our members do not fear the loss of jobs if they voice concern about improper maintenance practices or refuse to perform unsafe work. Congress can pass laws and the FAA can issue regulations, but unless the front-line mechanic isn't afraid to object when management put profits before safety, they are meaningless.

Overseas repair facilities are a separate, more dangerous issue. The July 2003 Inspector General Report highlighted the weak oversight of aircraft maintenance performed

overseas by third-party contractors. The amount of certified foreign repair station has increased more than 300 percent since federal regulations were significantly loosened in 1988.

Congress directed the FAA to submit a plan March 12, 2004 to ensure that foreign repair stations working on U.S. aircraft are subject to the same level of safety and oversight as required here at home.

Mr. Chairman, we are still waiting for the FAA to submit a viable plan..

Furthermore, having U.S. aircraft repaired overseas opens up this country to a great security risk. It is not hard to imagine how certified foreign aircraft repair stations working on U.S. aircraft could provide terrorists with an opportunity to sabotage U.S. aircraft or components that will eventually re-enter the U.S. for domestic service. These stations should be immediately closed down until security audits of those stations can be conducted and security vulnerabilities addressed.

There should be one standard for safety, security and FAA oversight at all aircraft repair facilities, including equivalent standards for criminal background checks and drug and alcohol testing of workers as well as tightening access to and security of repair facilities.

But the fact is that the FAA does not have sufficient funding to hire an adequate amount of inspectors to ensure aviation maintenance safety, at home or abroad. An immediate increase in FAA inspectors is necessary to safeguard the U.S. aviation industry.

Calls for increased airport security were sounded before 9-11 and ignored for economic reasons. Experts warned that the New Orleans levee system was inadequate to withstand a major storm, but they were not shored up due to cost. Mr. Chairman, members of this Committee, in case you haven't heard it before, let my testimony today serve as a warning that the oversight of maintenance on U.S. aircraft is almost non-existent.

I am here not only to sound an alarm, but to offer the assistance of the Machinists Union and all our members who build and maintain aircraft to help safeguard our aviation industry.

I thank the Committee for inviting us to participate in these proceedings and listening to our concerns.

I look forward to your questions.