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Workers charge jets still unsafe

Flight attendants hit security

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Dozens of flight attendants charged yesterday that they remain vulnerable to terrorists because nothing has been done to improve airport security since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Greg Davidowitch, the union representative for United Airlines flight attendants at LaGuardia and Kennedy airports, said the issue has bogged down in Congress.

"One of the big shames in this whole thing," he said, "is that we're almost six weeks after the fact and the federal government still has not addressed the security of the nation's sky."

Davidowitch spoke after a few dozen local flight attendants met with Patricia Friend, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, in midtown.

Dianne Tamuk of upstate Port Jervis, a United Airlines flight attendant out of Kennedy Airport for 23 years, said the focus of traveling should shift from passenger comfort to security.

"Last week, a passenger actually complained that his cookie was too soft," Tamuk said. "You're alone. You're guarding the cockpit and watching out for strange behavior in the cabin, and now you have to deal with a passenger who's not happy with the texture of his cookie?"

Friend said a lot of visible cosmetic changes have been made, such as stationing the National Guard at airports and placing more personnel at screening points.

But only 5% of checked baggages are screened through X-ray machines, Friend said. Nothing has been done to check the

background of ground personnel that have access to airports and aircraft. And there's no requirement that they wear photo identification, for instance.

With cockpit doors fortified against attack, flight attendants essentially would be responsible for keeping the aircraft cabin safe but are not being given any defensive capabilities or additional training, Friend charged.

'We will not keep quiet'

The union instructed flight attendants on calling and writing their congressional representatives to lobby for the assistance as well as the security changes.

"We are not going to let people forget this time," Friend said. "We will not keep quiet. We will not give up until we get the kind of security that we feel is needed."

The flight attendants also criticized Congress for not giving enough assistance to workers displaced in massive layoffs — even though lawmakers provided a \$15 billion bailout of the industry after last month's terrorists attacks.

Flight attendants, believing their fate to be tied to the success of the industry, lobbied for the bailout.

But, "in the final hour of debate, any relief that was to be provided for workers was eliminated, with a promise that another bill would take care of those problems. Well, that has not come true," Davidowitch said.

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