

 U·S AIRWAYS UNITED

The Dirty Truth:

*Pathogens and Contaminants
on Airline Blankets*

AIR CANADA 

AmericanAirlines®

 NORTHWEST AIRLINES

Prepared by UNITE
Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
1710 Broadway
New York, NY 10019

Executive Summary

- ♦ American Airlines, United Airlines, Air Canada, US Air, Continental Airlines and more than 100 airlines use Royal Airline Laundry.
- ♦ Royal workers in several locations report being instructed to repackage used airline blankets and headphones without cleaning them and ship the items back to the airlines for passenger use.
- ♦ Three separate reports have documented the existence of pathogens and contaminants on the blankets, pillowcases or headphones.
- ♦ One report found blankets with *pseudomonas paucimobilis*, a known pathogen, which has been known to cause infections in the lungs and eyes.
- ♦ Another report on airline cleanliness documented finding *escherichia coli* - A potentially lethal pathogen known to cause meningitis, urinary tract infections, inflammation of the lungs, diarrhea, nausea, cramps and vomiting.
- ♦ UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, AFL-CIO, CLC is calling on the FAA and the Department of Transportation to set standards for airline cleanliness and sanitation.
- ♦ UNITE, which represents 200 workers at Royal Airline Laundry and is involved in a campaign for union representation at many other Royal facilities, has documented these conditions, as well as other sweatshop conditions at Royal Airlines.
- ♦ Airlines are responsible for the cleanliness and sanitation of the airline linens and headphones, as well as the conditions under which the linens are cleaned.
- ♦ UNITE will be educating the passengers and the general public at airports across the nation about the findings in this report.

Airline passengers have been experiencing long lines, high prices and flight delays. But as airlines struggle to meet tighter flight schedules and increased passenger loads, consumers now face the additional problem of worrying about bacteria on airline blankets, pillowcases and headphones.

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) has uncovered problems with the industrial laundry that serves the airline industry. At Royal Airline Laundry, the dominant airline laundry firm that is used by over 150 different airlines, workers at several locations report being instructed by management to repackage blankets and headphones *without cleaning them* and return them to the airlines.

A sampling of blankets, pillowcases and headphones obtained from several of the largest airlines companies in the world and were submitted to laboratory analysis which revealed the existence of pathogens and potential pathogens.

The laboratory analysis of the blankets, headphones and pillowcases is consistent with and confirms another study of airline practices released on November 3, 2000 in

Workers in several locations report being instructed by management to repackage blankets and headphones *without cleaning them* and return them to the airlines.

Washington, D.C. The analysis also backs up a 1997 study of airline blankets, pillowcases, seat covers, and tray mats in Columbus, Ohio, which found high levels of a multiple number of pathogens.

The existence of the pathogens and possible pathogens as confirmed by multiple studies, and the business practices of Royal Airline Laundry (d/b/a Royal In-Flight Services, Royal Airline Linen Inc., Royal Airline Services, Royal Airline Linen of Chicago, Royal Airline Linen of Florida and Royal Airline Laundry Services Corp.) reveals the need for health standards and further analysis by the Department of Transportation and the Federal Aviation Administration and the airline industry to determine the potential health risks of exposure to pathogens and contaminants by airline travelers.

UNITE, which represents 200 workers at Royal Airline Laundry and is involved in a campaign for union representation at many other Royal facilities, first reported the use of child labor and other illegal actions by Royal Airline Laundry. (The report “Sweatshops in the Friendly Skies” is available at www.uniteunion.org) New reports by Royal workers indicate that Royal Airline Laundry frequently does not wash used blankets destined for airlines. Workers in Chicago report that, while blankets that are obviously stained, ripped or frayed are discarded, blankets that do not *appear* to be dirty are repackaged every day and sent out to be used again. This practice occurs even with some blankets that workers describe as being ‘rotten’ or ‘moldy.’ At the Royal facility in New York, workers report that often they separate napkins and blankets, but only wash the napkins.

Royal Airline Laundry frequently does not wash used blankets destined for airlines.

With in-flight headsets Royal’s practices are similar. Workers in several locations report that in-flight headsets are received in large tangled quantities. The workers are instructed to untangle them and if they are visibly broken they are told to repair them. Otherwise the headsets are *repackaged uncleaned* and returned to be used by new airline passengers.

A small sample of blankets, pillowcases and headphones from United Airlines, American Airlines and Air Canada were analyzed by Superior Laboratories of Columbus, Ohio. Superior Laboratories is a food and environmental testing laboratory that has tested airline samples for environmental contamination and air quality on four separate occasions.

Superior Laboratories took twelve square-inch microbial samples from each of the items they tested. The samples were cultivated for five days at 25 degrees Celsius, identified and counted.

Over seven years Superior Laboratories surveyed sites found in offices, homes, businesses, processing plants, groceries, schools and garages. From the data collected, the lab developed a standard for determining whether or not a sample is clean or contaminated. According to Superior’s standards, any sample with a microbial count that is a single digit number of colony forming units per 12 square inches is deemed to be

clean. Samples with microbial counts greater than a single digit count per 12 square inches is deemed to be a contaminated surface.

The blankets from United Airlines, American Airlines and Air Canada were found to contain *Pseudomonas paucimobilis* a known pathogen. It has been known to cause infections in the lungs and eyes, it has also been known to cause bacteraemia (contamination in the blood system) or septic shock. Airline blankets were found to have microbial counts that ranged between 160 and 700 colony units per 12 square inches.

According to Superior Laboratories, that samples with microbial counts greater than a single digit count per 12 square inches is deemed to be a contaminated surface.

Headphones that were tested were also found to have *Pseudomonas paucimobilis*, contaminated at a level that was even higher than the blankets. As mentioned above, this

The blankets from United Airlines, American Airlines and Air Canada were found to contain *Pseudomonas paucimobilis* a known pathogen.

known pathogen has been known to cause bacteraemia (contamination in the blood system) or septic shock. The levels of *Pseudomonas paucimobilis* were found to be close to 1300 microbial counters per 12 square inches – even higher than on the blankets.

Pillowcases from United Airlines were found to have *Aspergillus niger* a pathogen that has been linked to a number of conditions ranging from pneumonia to gastrointestinal bleeding. Pillow material was found to have microbial counts that ranged between 470 to 870 colony units per 12 square inches.

The findings of this report are similar in character to those of other, admittedly more comprehensive reports. A report that aired on WJLA-ABC 7 News on November 5, 2000 entitled “Filthy Flights” said “the ‘plane’ truth is painfully disgusting when it comes to aviation hygiene, your health is literally up in the air.”

The investigators, using lab kits, took samples from airplane blankets, pillows and other surfaces. They report finding fecal coliform or human waste on one surface. Other samples taken as part of the same study revealed “disturbingly high levels of bacteria.”

The report concluded “That tray table, pillow case or even that blanket could make you sick.”

In 1997, an investigative news team from WBNS-10 in Columbus, Ohio conducted an eleven week study of airline cleanliness and air quality. Over a hundred samples of tray mats, headrests, blankets and pillows were taken from ten major airlines. Samples were taken from United Airlines, American Airlines, US Airways, Continental Airlines, Northwest, Southwest, Delta , Air Canada, America West and TWA. The results were that over 78% of the samples collected were contaminated.¹ In fact only two of the airline blankets sampled were not contaminated.

According to the lab,

“The high number of pathogenic bacterial isolates is important when cabin sites are thought to be cleaned before passenger use. The presence of these bacteria show the cleaning is limited or not performed frequently...The fungi were isolated most often from blankets and tray tables showing the lack of cleaning at these sites.” - Dr. Michael Burns, Superior Laboratories

That report found four major pathogens on airline linens and surfaces:

Escherichia coli - A potentially lethal pathogen known to cause meningitis, urinary tract infections, inflammation of the lungs, diarrhea, nausea, cramps and vomiting. It lives in the human intestinal tract and is found in fecal matter. It becomes a pathogen when it comes into contact with other human membranes.

Bacillus cereus – A pathogen identified as a leading cause of food poisoning, it often causes cramps, vomiting, diarrhea and nausea. *Bacillus cereus* is also known to cause meningitis and pneumonia.

Pseudomonas aeruginosa – This pathogen is of the same family as the pathogens found in the more recent study of airline blankets. It is known to cause wound and burn

¹ As reported in U.S. News & World Report, “Coffee, tea, or a can of disinfectant” by Katherine Beddingfield, 4/5/99.

infections, meningitis, urinary tract infections, eye infections and pneumonia. In infants or other highly susceptible persons this pathogen has been known to invade the bloodstream and cause fatal sepsis.

Staphylococcus aureus – This pathogen is known to cause boils, organ abscesses and meningitis.

In the same report, Dr. Burns of Superior Laboratories described the potential health risk posed by unclean airline surfaces like this:

Environmental contamination can have an important role in the development of illness such as transmission of cold viruses, tuberculosis, streptococcal throat infections, Legionaire's disease etc. This role can become especially important in confined space such as an airline cabin where the air is continually recirculated with minimal filtration. Surfaces such as headrests, tray tables, pillows and blankets can also be important in the transmission of contaminating microorganisms if these surfaces are not periodically disinfected.

It is difficult to trace instances of disease specifically to exposure on airlines. However, the Center for Disease Control has identified at least two cases in which exposure onboard an airplane has led to the transmission of a disease. In the first instance, influenza was thought to have been contracted through on-board exposure. In the second instance, passengers who showed no other risk factors for tuberculosis, developed the disease after sharing a flight with an infected patient.²

Royal Airline Laundry began as a small family business with limited contracts for airline work and has grown into a national chain and the dominant player in the airline laundry industry. In documents obtained from the Economic Development Corporation of New York, Royal is described as one the country's premiere cleaners of 'anything that comes off a plane.' In 1999, Royal franchises announced that they had over \$20 million dollars in revenue and had grown to include over 400 employees nationwide. Almost

² As reported by the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control in U.S. News & World Report, "Coffee, tea, or a can of disinfectant" by Katherine Beddingfield, 4/5/99.

every major domestic airline and a number of major international airlines use Royal as a provider of laundry and linen services (for a partial list, see appendix). In key markets, Royal is virtually the only provider of airline laundry services. At New York's John F. Kennedy airport, Royal boasts over 96% of the market share.

As a fully integrated network of laundries Royal boasts the ability to service airlines across the country. With franchises in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and San Francisco, and an ability to perform laundry services in Salt Lake City and Seattle; Royal markets its ability to provide system-wide service for its airline customers. Virtually no other laundry service in the country can boast that ability. Moreover Royal operates some of the only laundries that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has certified as limited repair stations. This allows Royal the ability to provide highly specialized services for the cleaning of seat covers and other airline fabric.

Despite the growth and apparent success of Royal, its practices are not only unhygienic, but unethical and may violate their contracts with individual airlines. These are not the only troubling practices of Royal Airline Laundry.

Workers at Royal Airline Laundry across the country have organized and demanded union recognition in response to low wages, inadequate benefits and shabby treatment. In Chicago, Royal workers earn up to \$2/hour less than unionized workers, and have significantly inferior benefits.

On November 8, 2000, the Chicago-area television station ABC 7 News aired an investigative report which showed Royal Airline Laundry using child labor, not paying overtime premiums and fining its employees. The television station interviewed a young woman who began working at Royal at the age of fourteen. The company was aware of her age but allowed her to continue working despite her being underage. The television station also documented how employees were not paid overtime premiums. A Royal worker's time card showed her working twenty-five hours of overtime, but the company only paid her for sixteen hours of overtime worked. The Fair Labor Standards Act

(FLSA) mandates that all employees receive time and a half when they work more than forty hours a week.

Other dangerous practices have also been demonstrated by Royal management. At Royal's Los Angeles facility, a citizens advocacy group had to bring a lawsuit against the company to stop them from breaking California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act. Royal was exposing its employees and area residents to dangerous levels of perchloroethylene a known carcinogenic agent. Moreover, the company was not notifying residents, employees or its consumers about the use of perchloroethylene as is mandated by the State of California.

Charges with the federal government have been filed at Royal in response to threats of discharge, retaliation and illegal surveillance.

It is the responsibility of the airlines to ensure that passengers have clean and sanitary blankets, headphones and linens. Airlines are also responsible for the conditions under which their linens are cleaned. The airlines proven inability or unwillingness to monitor themselves means that the Federal Government needs to step in, to protect the passengers and provide them peace of mind.

In response to consumer complaints about airline delays, over-booking and quality of service, the Aviation Consumer Protection Division of the Department of Transportation investigates airlines practices. The Inspector General of the Department of Transportation makes recommendations to the airlines concerning guidelines which address consumer complaints.

UNITE is calling on the Department of Transportation to include standards of cleanliness and sanitation for blankets, headrests, and other items to ensure consumer confidence.

Appendix

Partial list of Royal Airline Laundry Customers

AER LINGUS	KUWAIT AIRWAYS
AEROFLOT	LAN CHILE
AEROLINEAS ARGENTINAS	LOT POLISH AIRLINES
AEROMEXICO	LTU
AIR AFRIQUE	LUFTHANSA AIRLINES
AIR ATLANTIC DOMINICANA	MALEV HUNGARIAN AIRLINES
AIR CANADA	MYRTLE BEACH JET EXPRESS
AIR FRANCE	NATIONAL AIRLINES
AIR INDIA	NORTH AMERICAN AIRLINES
AIR JAMAICA	NORTHWEST AIRLINES
ALL NIPPON AIRWAYS (ANA)	OLYMPIC AIRWAYS
AMERICA WEST AIRLINES	PAKISTAN AIRLINES
AMERICAN AIRLINES	QANTAS AIRWAYS
AMERICAN EAGLE	ROYAL AIR MAROC
BALKAN BULGARIAN AIRLINES	ROYAL JORDANIAN
BIMAN BANGLADESH AIRLINES	SABENA AIRLINES
BRITISH AIRWAYS	SINGAPORE AIRLINES
BWIA	SUN COUNTRY AIRLINES
CATHAY PACIFIC	TACA AIRLINES
CONTINENTAL AIRLINES	TAROM-ROMANIAN AIRLINES
DELTA AIR LINES	TRANS MERIDIAN AIRLINES
EGYPT AIR	TRANS WORLD AIRLINES (TWA)
EL-AL AIRLINES	UNITED AIRLINES
GUYANA AIRLINES	US AIRWAYS
IBERIA	VARIG
ICELANDAIR	VASP (BRAZILIAN AIRLINES)
JAPAN AIRLINES	VIRGIN ATLANTIC AIRLINES
KLM ROYAL DUTCH AIRLINES	WORLD AIRWAY
KOREAN AIR	

