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'Chaos in the Sky': Commercial Airline Pilots File Their First Lawsuit Over Transportation Mask Mandate

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Hours after the U.S. Senate voted to repeal the federal transportation mask mandate—which the White House quickly threatened to veto—a group of commercial pilots filed the first legal challenge by airline workers to overturn the requirement to wear masks on all public transport.

On March 15, 10 commercial airline pilots from six states filed a lawsuit with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia against the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and its parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), asking the court to strike down the federal transportation mask mandate, arguing that it endangers aviation safety.

The complaint was filed the same day the U.S. Senate voted 57–40 to repeal the mask mandate, a move the White House quickly threatened to veto. This is the first legal challenge to the mandate filed by airline workers.

On March 14, 17 Republican legislators sued the CDC over the mask mandate, saying it did not have legal authority to impose the mandate in the first

place. And on March 23, the CEOs of 10 U.S. passenger and cargo airlines sent a letter to President Joe Biden calling for an end to the mask mandate and pre-departure testing rules.

The day after taking office on Jan. 21, 2021, Biden issued "Executive Order Promoting COVID-19 Safety in Domestic and International Travel." According to the complaint (pdf) filed by the airline pilots, this executive order set in motion the transportation mask mandate issued by the CDC and HHS as well as other federal agencies.

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