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Still on the Job, but at Half the Pay

By [LOUIS UCHITELLE](#)

MECHANICSVILLE, Va. — The dark blue captain's hat, with its golden oak-leaf clusters, sits atop a bookcase in Bryan Lawlor's home, out of reach of the children. The uniform their father wears still displays the four stripes of a commercial airline captain, but the hat stays home. The rules forbid that extra display of authority, now that Mr. Lawlor has been downgraded to first officer.

He is now in the co-pilot's seat in the 50-seat commuter jets he flies, not for any failure in skill. He wears his captain's stripes, he explains, to make that point. But with air travel down, his employer cut costs by downgrading 130 captains, those with the lowest seniority, to first officers, automatically cutting the wage of each by roughly 50 percent — to \$34,000 in Mr. Lawlor's case.

The demotion, the loss of command, the cut in pay to less than his wife, Tracy, makes as a fourth-grade teacher, have diminished Mr. Lawlor, 34, in his own eyes. He still thinks he will return to being the family's principal breadwinner, although as the months pass he worries more. "I don't want to be a 50-year-old pilot earning \$40,000 a year," he said, adding that his wife does not want to be married to a pilot with so little earning power.

In recent decades, layoffs were the standard procedure for shrinking labor costs. Reducing the wages of those who remained on the job was considered demoralizing and risky: the best workers would jump to another employer. But now pay cuts, sometimes the result of downgrades in rank or shortened workweeks, are occurring more frequently than at any time since [the Great Depression](#).

State workers in Georgia are taking home smaller paychecks. So are the tens of thousands of employees in California's public university system. The steel company [Nucor](#) and the technology giant [Hewlett-Packard](#) have embraced the practice. So have several airlines and many small businesses.

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) does not track pay cuts, but it suggests they are reflected in the steep decline of another statistic: total weekly pay for production workers, pilots among them, representing 80 percent of the work force. That index has fallen for nine consecutive months, an unprecedented string over the 44 years

the bureau has calculated weekly pay, capturing the large number of people out of work, those working fewer hours and those whose wages have been cut. The old record was a two-month decline, during the 1981-1982 recession.

“What this means,” said Thomas J. Nardone, an assistant commissioner at the bureau, “is that the amount of money people are paid has taken a big hit; not just those who have lost their jobs, but those who are still employed.”

Bryan and Tracy Lawlor, who is also 34, have hidden their straitened circumstances from their four young children, mainly at his insistence. But as their savings dwindle, Christmas, a key indicator in the Lawlor family, will mean fewer presents this year. The Lawlors have made a practice of piling on toys and new clothes for their children at Christmas, buying relatively less the rest of the year. That will make a cutback noticeable this holiday season, and the parents are concerned that their children will begin to realize why.

“You don’t want to see disappointment on their faces; that makes me feel horrible,” Mr. Lawlor said. “You can be the best pilot in the airline and make the best landings, and in their eyes, I am not going to be as important as I was.”

A Dream Come True

Bryan Lawlor was five years out of [Virginia Tech](#) before he turned to aviation, his first love as a boy. His mother still cherishes a photo of her son, age 5, seated in a cockpit. But Mr. Lawlor studied chemistry in college and he used that skill, taking jobs as a chemical technician, to support his growing family. Layoffs marred those early years and in 2003 Mr. Lawlor made the “crossroads” decision to become a commercial pilot, borrowing \$24,000 to learn to fly and to acquire the necessary licenses.

His current employer, ExpressJet Airlines, is a spinoff from a feeder operation for [Continental Airlines](#). It brought passengers to Delta hubs as well, mainly in the West, and to help handle that traffic, Mr. Lawlor was promoted to captain from first officer in July 2007. His pay rose to \$68,000, with the prospect of reaching \$100,000 — roughly triple a first officer’s pay.

That is not so much money by the standards of an earlier era. Even senior captains on legacy airlines rarely earn above \$200,000 today, as they often did in the past. Mr. Lawlor says pilots’ pay these days fails to recognize the training and skill involved in transporting passengers even more safely than in the past.

But Mr. Lawlor felt he was headed in the right financial direction until the economy, and the airline business, took a tumble. It is a setback that worries his wife, who wants her husband back on the income path that was

interrupted one year ago this month. "I certainly don't earn enough to make up for what he lost," she said, adding that to make matters worse, "teachers didn't get a raise in our school this year."

Still, as her husband's ordeal drags on, Mr. Lawlor in some ways has risen in his wife's eyes. "I have more respect for him," she said. "I can see he is angry and upset, but he does not show it very often, and never to the kids."

That is less and less true, Mr. Lawlor said, amending his wife's appraisal. One year into his downgrade, "never" has turned to "rarely" and, in recent weeks, "not so rarely." He blew up last week at his 3-year-old son, Shayne, for refusing to take a nap, and sent the child whimpering to his room. Then, after arranging with another pilot to delay a flight so he could "dead-head" home in the early afternoon instead of having to wait for the next flight, he blew up at his wife for failing to appreciate the effort he had made and the stress involved.

"My mind is always on 20 different things," Mr. Lawlor said. "What do I need to get done? How much will it cost? Is it necessary? Can I do it cheaper if I do it myself? Can I make the earlier commute home? Rush, rush, rush, and then suddenly someone makes the wrong comment and I become uncorked."

A Different Kind of Provider

As a captain for ExpressJet in calmer times, Mr. Lawlor commuted across the country to Los Angeles, his home base, for each three- or four-day trip. Now, as a first officer, his base is Newark, a far shorter commute from the Lawlor home in this Richmond suburb. So he is home more. He spends that time caring for the two youngest children, Shayne and Jackson, 16 months, while his wife takes the two oldest, Zachary, 7, and Kelley, 10, with her to the elementary school where she teaches and they are enrolled as students.

"A lot of my friends say their husbands would not stay home with the kids on their days off, even to save money," Mrs. Lawlor said, "but Bryan feels that if he is going to be home more that is what he should do, and he is doing it."

Mrs. Lawlor praises her husband's adeptness in the routines of child care. But money also drives him. Each day that Jackson and Shayne are not delivered to the home of the baby sitter is \$50 that can be spent elsewhere. That wasn't a priority while Mr. Lawlor was captain. In the 14 months that he held that rank, his \$68,000 in pay and Tracy's \$40,000 as a fourth-grade teacher were enough, as Mr. Lawlor put it, for the family — for the first time — to spend freely and still save money.

He purchased a white gold 10th anniversary band for his wife and a bright yellow [Harley-Davidson](#) motorcycle for himself, imagining that he would take it for spins on his days off, the wind blowing in his hair as he raced

along the sparsely populated roads in Richmond's semi-rural suburbs. "It was a present to myself when I upgraded to captain," he said.

The \$10,000 Harley sat for months in the garage before it finally sold, with only 175 miles on the odometer. Mr. Lawlor had never ridden it much. His wife objected that he would exclude the family unless, as she pointedly put it, he could "find some way to strap the kids on the motorcycle." Now the desire to ride the eye-catching hog is gone. If he ever makes another vanity purchase, Mr. Lawlor says, it will be something the family can use.

His mother, Patricia Lawlor, anguishes over this scaling back of his exuberance and the psychological effect of the pay cut.

"Let me put it this way," she said of her only son, the oldest of her three children. "When we went out to dinner and he was a captain, with a captain's pay, he for the first time picked up the check. He would say, 'I'll get it, Dad,' instead of letting his father pick it up. It gave him a great deal of pride to do that. 'Let me buy, Dad, for once.' And now he does not say that anymore."

While Mr. Lawlor was still a captain, his parents decided to move into smaller quarters, and the son and daughter-in-law bought their five-bedroom house, getting a break on the price but increasing their mortgage payment to \$2,000 a month from the \$1,200 they had paid for their smaller home nearby.

They closed on the house in August 2008, on the eve of the downgrade, and soon there were regrets. "We would not have bought the house on a first officer's salary," Tracy Lawlor said. She had considered giving up teaching to be a stay-at-home mom. "We felt we had some breathing room for the first time in our 11 years of marriage," she said, "and that went out the window with the downgrade."

She was sitting at her kitchen table, and her husband, across from her, winced, but did not disagree. Even if his captain's rank and pay are restored she will continue to teach, she said. His pay could be cut again. They are convinced of that and, in preparation, they made certain there would be no more children. Their fourth, Jackson, was just 4 months old when the downgrade came, and soon after, Mr. Lawlor underwent a vasectomy.

"We could not take the risk of having another child," he said.

Silver, and Dark, Linings

The West Coast assignment, while representing a promotion, meant long, often overnight commutes, with

Mr. Lawlor sleeping fitfully in the jump seat of a [FedEx](#) cargo jet or in a sleeping bag rolled out in the cargo area. His first day home, he often spent dozing on the living room couch. His wife hated the time taken from the family, and her husband's exhaustion.

"He was totally worn out the first day back, and tired the whole time he was home," she said.

One year later, even after such a big pay cut, Mrs. Lawlor sees her husband's shorter commute to his new base at Newark as a blessing she is reluctant to give up. Her husband says that moving back up to captain, with a captain's pay, might mean commuting again to California. "If that is what it takes, I'll do it," he said, and this time his wife winced.

"I would probably not be happy," she said. But she "wouldn't trade him for another husband," as she put it, and while she had never wanted her husband to be a pilot, at this point she would be alarmed if he left aviation in an attempt to please her.

"He likes what he does," she said, "whereas before he did not like what he did. That has made him easier to be around, whereas before he became a pilot, he wasn't happy at all."

Mr. Lawlor is vice chairman for contract enforcement for the ExpressJet unit of the [Air Line Pilots Association](#). He had volunteered some months ago for the unpaid role, and now his fellow pilots seek his help in resolving scheduling disputes, pay issues, meal reimbursements. The calls and e-mail messages come in on his cellphone. When he is home, minding his sons, he lets the children migrate to the living room to watch a cartoon on the family's big-screen TV while he sits nearby, at the kitchen table, absorbed in mediating appeals.

That is not the same as commanding an airliner — walking through the airport wearing the captain's hat — but it brings him part way back. "My point would be that being in the captain's seat made me feel in command, and capable and powerful," Mr. Lawlor said, "and that has been taken away, and through the union, I can still experience some of that, in the admiration of my peers for being able to step up and help them. Maybe psychologically that fills a void; maybe that is why I don't feel as bad as I would otherwise."

So the Lawlors soldier on, with plenty of family help. Their sisters have pitched in with baby-sitting, gratis. His parents bought their kitchen table, the dining room table, a playpen, a living room sofa and the deck furniture. His father's two unmarried sisters, both retired teachers, insist on helping their only nephew — the one family member perpetuating the Lawlor name not only in this generation but, through his three sons, the next generation.

The aunts offer a subsidy. They insist, for example, that Bryan Lawlor eat healthy meals when he is on the road, even if that means spending more than his airline-allotted per diem. They'll pay, and Mr. Lawlor says he does now eat properly. The aunts also paid \$200 to rent "moon bounce" equipment for a Lawlor child's birthday party last month. The birthday boy had asked for the party entertainment, and the Lawlors obliged, with the aunts' help, not wanting the father's loss of income to translate into constraints on the children's lives.

Still, their savings, built up in the good years, have dwindled to \$10,000, from \$28,000 last fall, and Mr. Lawlor said the next rung down, to four figures, is in his mind a crisis level. "I am beginning to feel like, what if something happens to me, where does that leave Tracy?" he said.

He called in sick recently, suffering basically from fatigue. "I think the reason I felt fatigued is the stress," he said. "It is always there."

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