

Working the Skies



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著者:Whitelegg, Drew

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Get ready for takeoff. The life of the flight attendant, a.k.a., stewardess, was supposedly once one of glamour, exotic travel and sexual freedom, as recently depicted in such films as "Catch Me If You Can" and "View From the Top". The nostalgia for the beautiful, carefree and ever helpful stewardess perhaps reveals a yearning for simpler times, but nonetheless does not square with the difficult, demanding and sometimes dangerous job of today's flight attendants. Based on interviews with over sixty flight attendants, both female and male labor leaders, and drawing upon his observations while flying across the country and overseas, Drew Whitelegg reveals a much more complicated profession, one that in many ways is the quintessential job of the modern age where life moves at record speeds and all that is solid seems up in the air. Containing lively portraits of flight attendants, both current and retired, this book is the first to show the intimate, illuminating, funny, and sometimes dangerous behind-the-scenes stories of daily life for the flight attendant. Going behind the curtain, Whitelegg ventures into first-class, coach, the cabin, and life on call for these men and women who spend week in and week out in foreign cities, sleeping in hotel rooms miles from home. "Working the Skies" also elucidates the contemporary work and labor issues that confront the modern worker: the demands of full-time work and parenthood; the downsizing of corporate America and the resulting labor lockouts; decreasing wages and hours

worked; job insecurity; and the emotional toll of a high stress job. Given the events of 9/11, flight attendants now have an especially poignant set of stressful concerns to manage, both for their own safety as well as for those they serve, the passengers. Flight attendants, originally registered nurses charged with attending to passengers' medical needs, now find themselves wearing the hats of therapist, security guard, and undercover agent. This last set of tasks, as Whitelegg shows, pushes some out of the business altogether.

作者介绍:

目录:

[Working the Skies_下载链接1_](#)

标签

评论

[Working the Skies_下载链接1_](#)

书评

[Working the Skies_下载链接1_](#)