

US labor roundup

Our Reporters
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Slowdown at Northwest Airlines

Officials at Northwest Airlines are blaming the high incidence of flight delays during the past week on an unauthorized work slowdown by pilots and mechanics. The airline is threatening “aggressive” retaliation against those taking part. Since April 15 cancellations have been running at a rate well over the normal average of 20 per day. On Wednesday 106 flights were cancelled.

None of the unions at Northwest Airlines has commented officially on the action. An anonymous source from the Air Line Pilots Association quoted in the *Detroit Free Press* said that a pamphlet circulating in Northwest hubs located in Minneapolis and Detroit was urging pilots to work by the books. It also called for a sick-out the first week in May. “We are urging our members to rip them down from bulletin boards when they see them,” the ALPA source said.

On Friday Northwest unions staged a protest over the lack of progress in negotiations at the company’s annual stockholder meeting in New York. The airline has been negotiating since the fall of 1996 with the pilots, machinists, Teamsters and three small professional unions on the terms of a contract revision. Northwest pilots began mail balloting on strike authorization April 15. Results of the vote will not be known until sometime after May 15.

In 1993 Northwest workers gave up \$838 million in concessions at a time when the airline was suffering financial losses. Since then Northwest has returned to profitability. On Tuesday the company reported a \$71 million profit for the first quarter of 1998, up 9 percent. However, management is demanding further concessions, including a lower pay scale for pilots of narrow body planes. The proposed pay rate would be even lower than the B scale established for pilots with

less than five years seniority in the last round of cuts.

An unauthorized work slowdown by Northwest mechanics at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport in February and March 1997 led to the cancellation of up to 20 percent of flights. As they are now doing in relation to the pilots, the airline unions disassociated themselves from the action and refused to defend the workers involved.

Chrysler fires local union president

In the wake of a one-day wildcat strike April 3 Chrysler has fired the local union president and a skilled trades committeeman and suspended 14 other workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant north of Detroit. In addition the company has reportedly issued warning letters to 700 of the 1,400 second shift workers involved in the walkout. The plant, which builds midsize sedans, runs two shifts of 1,400 workers each.

The immediate cause of the wildcat was the suspension of a United Auto Workers committeeman who had confronted management over the use of outside contractors in the plant. The walkout began shortly after the start of the second shift. Workers marched through the plant calling on others to join in the protest. The strikers remained inside the plant for several hours before dispersing. A spokesman for Chrysler called the wildcat: “A violation of the national agreement. That’s not something we can tolerate.”

The strike was the first at Chrysler since April 1997 and the first ever at the Sterling Heights plant, which opened in 1984. The facility had been held up as a model of labor-management cooperation.

Nurses end strike in Brooklyn

700 nurses at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York voted Tuesday to ratify a concessionary three-year contract and end their strike that began March 30. The hospital stayed open during the walkout with the aid of 325 strikebreakers.

The union, the New York State Nurses Association, has not yet released the vote count. Nurses had been working without a contract for three months before the strike began.

Few details of the settlement have been released. However, the union conceded part of management's demands on the key issue of staffing and work hours. While management agreed to permit nurses to maintain their regular three-day, 12-hour weekly schedule in six units, including the emergency room as well as labor and delivery, it won the right to impose an expanded five-day, eight-hour schedule on nurses in all other units.

The nurses union maintains that the new agreement does not permit the shift of personnel from unit to unit with virtually no retraining, as management had demanded.

The union dropped its demand for a 5 percent raise in base pay. Instead, the contract stipulates a wage freeze for the first year and bonuses of \$500 in each of the next two years, an effective pay cut, given current levels of inflation.

Management said it needed concessions from nurses because the medical center is under serious financial stress as a result of reductions in Medicare reimbursements, which fell \$11.2 million last year. Maimonides recently suffered a further cut in income when it lost a contract with a managed care company.



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