

# Northwest Airlines workers rebel against machinists' union

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The anger of Northwest Airlines workers against the International Association of Machinists (IAM) has reached new heights with 60 percent of the union's 9,100 mechanics and cleaners signing recertification cards to replace the IAM with the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA).

The IAM represents 27,000 mechanics, ground workers, clerks and office personnel--the largest section of workers involved in the present contract struggle against Northwest Airlines. In 1993 the IAM agreed to major concessions when Northwest threatened bankruptcy. When the IAM's contract expired in 1996 after Northwest restored its profitability, and granted huge pay raises to executives, workers expected to be rewarded.

However, for 22 months the workers have gone without a new contract. This has sparked slowdowns by disgruntled workers. A federal government report ranked Northwest worst among the 10 largest airlines in consumer complaints in May.

The long drawn-out talks produced an agreement containing additional concessions and a 14 percent pay increase over a four-year contract, without any compensation for lost wage increases since 1996. Given their level of sacrifice over many years workers were angered by the paltry wage increase, particularly when measured against the compensation offered to CEO John Dasburg.

A July 16 informational meeting, called to discuss the tentative contract proposal reached between the union and Northwest, boiled over with anger as workers demanded answers to questions and jeered union officials for the sub-standard contract. Suspecting the worst right from the start, workers booed union officials as they were introduced at the beginning of the meeting. During the meeting there were constant interruptions including the chant, 'strike, strike, strike.'

Younger mechanics hired since 1996 were upset they are not receiving the same 'no layoff' protection provided to workers employed prior to 1996. Mechanics fumed over the fact that the IAM did not obtain language against farming out their work to outside contractors. 'Go back and get it,' yelled one worker.

At the end of the meeting, Paul Scarpari, general chairman of the Twin Cities-based IAM District 143, was standing outside the meeting when a worker walked up to him and said, 'You screwed us,' while intentionally spilling beer on him. Another worker threw an egg that hit IAM Grand Lodge Representative Marv Sandrin.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several workers about their concerns over the tentative contract. A veteran Customer Service Agent reported, 'I was at that meeting last Thursday. People were very angry. They feel like they've been sold out. We took concessions in 1993. Parts of the contract here are more concessions and they don't think they should have to take any concessions.'

'For instance, there's the loss of the short hour. Right now, if your job requires you to work six minutes past your punch-out time, you're automatically paid for a full hour. It's not really a money issue. It doesn't add up to much of a dollar value. It's more of an issue of forcing the company to keep to a 40-hour week. What happens quite often is they keep you for 10 or 15 minutes, then you miss your bus, and before you know it you're delayed another 30 or 40 minutes. It prevents them from taking advantage of you. It's a penalty against the company: 'If you're going to delay me 10 or 15 minutes, you're going to have to pay me the whole hour.' As a CSA [customer service agent] we have to close the doors on the flight. If a flight is delayed for half an hour at the end of my shift and there is nobody to take my place, I have to remain and shut the door.'

'They also want to take away three of our holidays and float them. Right now we have eight holidays. If we should have to work them, they would have to pay us double-time and a half. But if they float them, we would take them on another day and lose the premium pay.'

'The pay increase is 14 percent. And when you think of 14 percent, it does sound like a big pay increase. Except we haven't had a pay increase since 1991. In 1993 we had concessions and snap-back in 1996. This contract goes until 2002. When you look at the 14 percent over that period of time, from 1991 to 2002, it doesn't sound that great.'

'We expected the union to go after what we really wanted. What happened is that they settled for much less than what we expected. That's what has people angry.'

An Equipment Service Employee (ESE) who works as a ramp worker said, 'The company has a lot of rules at our expense and we thought some of this would be changed. Take today. It's a nice day and they froze guys for two hours extra on their job. They can come up to you with 15 minutes to go on your shift and freeze you to your job. You might be standing in line waiting to punch out and they can freeze you. The company tends to make up work rules as they go. Whatever it is, they put up a notice and you're stuck.'

'To me, it's cut and dried. The union is in bed with the company, and guys are fed up with it. From what I understand--and this has to do with the merger of Continental and Northwest--the company has promised the union 2,100 new employees in the next couple years, and that adds up to a lot of dues money.'

'So you've got new people coming in and this contract does not protect any of the people at Northwest with seniority after 1996. I've only got one and a half years here. They union will not be protecting my job. If the company wants to lay me off, they can do it.'

'I say this to the union. If I'm paying you protection money and you can't protect my job, then don't take \$32 a month out of my check.'

What do I need you for? I could have walked up to management and gotten that 14 percent raise.

'And right now, the company will fire you if you sneeze too loud on the job. The union told us that if anyone got fired, they wouldn't look into it until after the contract is settled--they don't have time. In a way, you're better off not coming back right away until the issue is settled because they put you on a probationary period. It can be for up to a year. And once you sign, if you do anything wrong, you are gone.'

Another ESE worker said, 'The main thing I don't like is that they won't protect our jobs, and yet Northwest wants to hire more people. We want job protection. What can happen is that the company could ask you to take a lower wage-scale job and if you refuse, you get fired.'

'There are a number of other things in the contract,' said another ESE. 'They could block you from taking vacation during certain periods, like say, from May to August. Right now, we can still bid for vacation during those periods.'

'I'm a ramp worker and it used to be if you worked through your lunch, they would pay you for it. Now, that won't happen. So I suppose if a plane is waiting to be loaded and it's my lunch period, well, that plane is just going to have to sit there.'

'Also, part-timers are going to have to pay a greater percentage of their uniform. We will have to pay for our jackets. And jackets don't last long on this job. But this is Minnesota, and in the winter you've got to have one.'

'There is also a benefit called 'pass travel.' We can get a flight with Northwest and pay only a certain percent of the ticket. This agreement will raise the percentage we have to pay.'

One ESE worker with only four months at Northwest said, 'I'm new to this job, but some of the older guys have been explaining the contract to me and I agree with them. There are a lot of things they've fought for in the past and they shouldn't be given up. They believe the union shafted them by bargaining these things away.'

'And what they're upset about most of all is that they want retroactive pay back to 1996 when this contract expired. But the union says no. These guys work their butts off. I think they deserve it. They've got families with three and four children. I don't know how many children Dasburg [Northwest CEO] has, but I'm sure they're well taken care of. I think it's disgusting all the money that Dasburg and the other executives are making.'

'Right now, out on the ramp the guys are pretty solid against this contract. That's both the full-timers and part-timers, young and old. We're like a big family. I can't see the contract passing.'

The IAM has scheduled a ratification meeting for July 29. The contract proposal covers four different classifications of workers and rejection by any section of workers would force a return to negotiations. A simple majority in each section would ratify.

The recertification vote for Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association could be between three to six months away. If the mechanics reject the agreement, AMFA could begin bargaining for the IAM later this year.

AMFA first emerged in the 1960s as a watchdog committee of airline mechanics inside the IAM. When the committee began to draw the interest of the rank and file the IAM reacted by bringing the leading members up on charges for dual unionism and fining them. Later, AMFA was formed and did win elections to represent mechanics at Ozark and Hughes airlines.

While tapping into the growing anger of workers towards the IAM bureaucracy the AMFA leaders provide no serious alternative. The union's literature has the following to say: 'Unfortunately, technicians

are a small minority in this union and positions such as aircraft baggage handlers and clerical workers are seeking the same level of compensation--despite the technicians' much higher level of education and responsibility. Given that this just doesn't seem fair and that technicians are not represented properly in today's negotiations, it's time to introduce you to a not-so-new concept in representation for airline technicians--craft unionism.'

Such a perspective only serves to divide and weaken workers in the face of a concerted attack by the airline giants and their Wall Street investors. The AMFA's narrow strategy is to negotiate better contracts for mechanics at the expense of less skilled sections of the work force. But even if AMFA were to obtain some initial results for mechanics, craft unionism offers workers no defense against vast capitalist enterprises with increasingly global operations. The concern among IAM mechanics over farming out is a case in point. Northwest operates both in the US and Asia, and in addition has an operating alliance with European-based KLM. It also has reached an agreement to merge with Continental Airlines. The airline bosses pit workers throughout their global operations against each other. The IAM has failed its members essentially because of its nationalistic and pro-capitalist outlook. The alternative to the IAM is not to embrace the reactionary perspective of craft unionism, but to organize the international unity of workers in a struggle against transnational corporations.

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