

Northwest Airlines prepares for strike

Jerry White
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Northwest Airlines cancelled 400 flights scheduled for this Friday and Saturday in preparation for a possible strike by 6,150 pilots Saturday at 12:01 a.m. EDT. Negotiations under the supervision of a federal mediator continued for the eighth straight day, and although spokesmen for the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) declared there was some progress, no settlement was reached. The flight cancellations affected some 25,000 passengers.

Talks are taking place at the company's headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota. About 50 pilots participated in an information picket there Thursday, with another picket scheduled for Friday at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, Northwest's second largest hub.

With Northwest making record profits for the past four years, including \$119 million in the first six months of 1998, workers are demanding substantial wage increases to compensate for the concessions they made when the airline faced financial difficulties earlier in the decade. In 1993 pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and ground crew took an average 15 percent pay cut.

Wall Street analysts say the strike would cost Northwest \$10 million a day, but that its stocks would not fall if it takes on the pilots and the other unions and holds back their wage demands. This will be the first major strike when the airline industry is booming, and Wall Street wants no let up on the pressure which has kept wages and benefits low, and profits high. As one analyst said, 'Management is responsible not to give away the store.'

Northwest has received a line of credit from the banks and amassed \$3 billion for the strike. The company claims it can weather a walkout of up to 300 days.

ALPA is asking for a 15 percent pay increase over three years, the establishment of a profit sharing plan and a \$25,000 signing bonus to be paid in cash and stock. The union has also criticized a management

proposal to limit a proposed no-layoff clause to workers hired before November 1, 1996, thus excluding some 700 newly hired pilots. ALPA has also called for the elimination of the existing two-tier wage scale.

A pilot walkout against Northwest, the fourth largest US airline, would cripple air transportation in the Midwest. In Minneapolis, Detroit and Memphis, Tennessee, Northwest controls 75 to 82 percent of all airline seats. In the past five years, the major US carriers have largely divided up the domestic market and, to avoid competition, focused on routing passengers through a handful of major airports that they control.

A New York Times article Thursday suggested that President Clinton might use his powers under the 1926 Railway Labor Act to force the pilots back to work for 60 days while a special presidential emergency board negotiated a settlement. Last year Clinton intervened within minutes after 9,300 pilots at American Airlines walked out.

The pilots are the first section of Northwest workers to receive official strike sanction. On August 12 the International Association of Machinists requested that the National Mediation Board declare an impasse after members rejected by a wide margin a contract brought back by the union.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a Northwest baggage handler in Minneapolis about the confrontation.

'The face-off is here. The traveling public is already leery of a strike. They're not booking. In just one day there is a drastic amount of difference in the amount of bags we're handling.'

'If the pilots strike, I would think Northwest will probably lay off the majority of us. We hope the pilots get a fair shake and get what they want. They deserve it. Probably no one wants a strike. Nobody wants to get laid off. But we have to support each other. We hope to

have support when it comes back to us getting a contract.

'As far as negotiations with the machinists, my understanding is that we're supposed to be talking with the company. I don't know if we're back to the negotiating table after rejecting our contract proposal. Our union asked for an impasse to be declared. Whether or not they will rule on that by the end of the month--I don't know.

'It's interesting what's going on in our union. The mechanics are really ticked off. I can't say I blame them. There's graffiti all over the airport that says, 'My union is sleeping with the company.'

'The contract proposal that the IAM voted on was really junk. You've got the union hierarchy people shoving this down your throat telling you, 'This is the best you're going to get. Take it. It's a good deal.'

'One simple point: We might merge with Continental. Now our union is telling us that this contract is going to put us at the top of the industry standards. Even with a 4 percent raise, we would still be making less money than the Continental people, and they're nonunion. The union is telling us how great this is and our people are pointing these things out to them.

'There's another thing. Right now, up to 5 percent of each workstation can be made up of part-time workers. They wanted to push that up to 35 percent. If you had 100 employees, only 5 could be part-time. If the proposal had passed, a part-timer would have 35 people ahead of him before he could get to the top and become a full-time employee. There's no way the part-time workers would have accepted this agreement.'

See Also:

Northwest Airlines, pilots union in talks as strike deadline approaches

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