

Pact rejected by wide margin

Northwest machinists vote down tentative contract

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With a strike by Northwest Airline pilots possible later this month, 27,000 Northwest machinists have voted down a tentative agreement negotiated by their union by a decisive margin.

According to Lodge 143 of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), four of five bargaining units rejected the offer. Mechanics, ground service workers, office and security workers voted down the agreement by margins ranging from 70 to 84 percent. The only unit approving the pact were 130 flight kitchen employees. The contract cannot be ratified without the approval of all bargaining units. The voter turnout was a record 85 percent.

Mechanics, cleaners and custodians voted no by a margin of 84 percent. Equipment service and stock clerks voted against the agreement by a 76 percent margin. 71 percent of plant protection workers voted to reject and 66 percent of the clerical and office staff voted no.

In the same ballot Northwest workers voted in favor of strike authorization by 18,835 to 3,303 -- a 83 percent margin.

The IAM is the largest of six unions that are in contract negotiations with Northwest Airlines. Before the recent tentative agreement the talks had been going on for nearly two years. Workers angry with the drawn out negotiations and passivity on the part of the IAM leadership initiated a work to rule action last April that caused many cancelled and delayed flights.

Negotiations between Northwest Airlines and the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) were officially declared at an impasse on July 28. The ruling by a federal arbitrator initiated a 30-day cooling off period. When that expires pilots will have the legal right to

strike.

The main issues in the contract negotiations with both the pilots and machinists have been job security, work rules and pay. Northwest workers took sizable concessions in 1993 when the company faced a financial crisis. Since then the airline has returned to profitability, but has refused to offer significant pay increases to its employees.

The contract rejected by IAM members called for a 14 percent wage increase over four years. Workers judged this amount insufficient given the sacrifices they had been asked to make and the huge salary awarded company executives such as CEO John Dasburg. Further, workers had wanted pay raises to be made retroactive to 1996. Many workers were also angry over language on subcontracting and proposed changes in work rules.

In July the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association, a small independent union, filed with the National Labor Relations Board for a recertification election to represent Northwest mechanics and cleaners, currently organized by the IAM. The AMFA got 60 percent of the mechanics and cleaners to sign recertification cards, tapping into the anger of workers with their current union. A vote on the change of affiliation could take place within three to six months.

A strike by Northwest pilots would have a devastating impact on air travel in Minneapolis and Detroit, the airlines two largest hubs. Northwest handles 80 percent of airline passenger traffic in Detroit.

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