

# Northwest Airlines, pilots union in talks as strike deadline approaches

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With a midnight August 28 strike deadline approaching, Northwest Airlines and its pilots union are in intense negotiations.



Informational picket of Northwest Airlines pilots at Detroit Metropolitan Airport

Both sides, however, denied a report by the Associated Press that a tentative settlement had been reached Wednesday. The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) and management have been meeting daily for the past week in an attempt to reach a new contract covering the airline's 6,150 pilots. Talks had dragged on for nearly two years before the National Mediation Board declared an impasse last month, clearing the way for the pilots to call a legal strike.

With Northwest Airlines making record profits for the past four years, workers are demanding a substantial wage increase to make up for previous concessions. In 1993 pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and ground crew workers took an average 15 percent pay cut at a time when the company faced financial problems.

ALPA is asking for a 15 percent pay increase over three years. The union is also calling for the establishment of a profit sharing plan and a \$25,000 signing bonus to be paid in cash and stock. Northwest has offered a 10 percent raise over five years. The union has 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.

As the strike deadline approaches Northwest management has begun taking drastic measures to prepare, canceling some one hundred of flights. The company has sent letters to employees ordering them to report to work in the event of a strike and threatening to fire any worker that refuses to cross the pilots' picket line. A clause in the contract of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the bargaining agent for 27,000 mechanics and ground crew workers, bans sympathy strikes. The provision was inserted in the last round of negotiations and has evoked considerable anger among the rank and file.

A pilot walkout at Northwest, the fourth largest US airline, could cripple air transportation in the Midwest. Republican governors from several states, including Minnesota, Iowa and Michigan, sent a joint letter to President Clinton warning that a strike could do 'irreparable harm.'

Despite this, major big business papers have backed the hard line being taken by Northwest. Wall Street is demanding that there be no let-up in the corporate assault on the jobs and living conditions of airline workers. Editorials in several big business newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*, have advised Clinton not to use his emergency powers to halt a strike. They are pushing for Northwest management to take on the union and deliver a decisive blow against the pilots, thus paving the way for major attacks on all airline employees.

Earlier, Northwest announced it had amassed a strike fund of \$3 billion and was prepared to weather a walkout lasting up to 300 days.

The pilots are the first group of Northwest workers to receive official strike sanction. On August 12 the IAM requested that the National Mediation Board declare an impasse after members rejected a proposed contract by a wide margin. In the same ballot IAM members voted for strike authorization. Meanwhile, flight attendants, members of the Teamsters, have held rallies in several cities to protest lack of progress in their negotiations.

Last April Northwest Airlines mechanics initiated a work-to-rule action that resulted in the cancellation or delay of scores of flights. The 'slowdown' reflected worker anger directed against both the IAM and management. The unions had nothing to show for 18 months of negotiations. Management refused to make a serious wage offer and kept insisting on more take-aways. Despite this, the IAM appeared ready to let the talks continue indefinitely.

In the wake of the work-to-rule action the IAM finally announced a tentative settlement. However, the agreement fell far short of members' expectations. Not only was the wage offer inadequate, the union had agreed to a number of concessions in work rules and failed to extend the no-layoff clause to protect younger workers. As a result workers in four out of five bargaining units voted it down by a more than a 2-1 margin.

Workers' anger at the betrayals of the IAM has led to mechanics and ground crew workers signing authorization cards to change their affiliation to the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association, a small independent craft union. A vote on union recertification could take place within the next six months.

A reporting team from the WSWs visited the Detroit Metro Airport recently and found widespread dissatisfaction among Northwest workers. One ground crew worker, a member of the IAM, said, 'The company sent out a notice telling employees it is illegal for them to join the pilots if they go out on strike. I don't like it, but we are bound by the contract. I don't think Northwest is fair. I am 100 percent for standing behind the pilots.'

A flight attendant with six and a half years said, 'We support the pilots. All of us deserve a decent wage increase. I started in 1992, shortly before the concessions went into effect in 1993. It did not hit me as hard as it did the other people who were already here, but everyone will tell you, we are living from

paycheck to paycheck.

'After six and a half years I am only making \$21,000 a year. When I began here I had to live with my parents at home and stretch a budget with a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. This is a job that looks glamorous, but I can tell you that it is hard to get by on what we earn.

'Unlike most jobs, we do not get time off on the major holidays. We work Christmas, New Years Day and the weekends at the same rate. And the time period for calculating our pay does not begin until the plane moves. We are not paid for the time passengers are boarding, or if a flight has been delayed and is sitting at the gate.

'We are hoping that the pilots will lead the way for all of us. Presently the flight attendants have full-time jobs, but we are getting part-time pay.'

See Also:

Northwest machinists vote down tentative contract  
[6 August 1998]

Northwest Airlines workers rebel against machinists union  
[29 July 1998]



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