

Impending pilots' strike at Northwest Airlines

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Negotiations for Northwest Airlines and the Air Line Pilots Association were continuing talks in a Minneapolis hotel as a 12:01 a.m. EDT strike deadline approached Saturday. Reportedly the bargainers, talking under the supervision of a federal mediator for the tenth straight day, had reached tentative agreement on most issues, but the most contentious, pay and job security, remained unresolved.



Northwest pilots in an informational picket at Detroit Metro airport on Friday

If no agreement is reached with the nation's fourth largest airline, 6,150 pilots are scheduled to abandon the cockpits of the carrier's 406 planes after midnight, and Northwest will park them at airports from Memphis to Tokyo.

The airline services 54 million passengers annually. With the shutdown of its operations and those of its Airlink regional feeders, some 2,640 daily departures at 223 airports in the US and internationally would be eliminated in the first 10 days of the strike. Northwest controls three-quarters of airline seats at its hub centers in Minneapolis, Detroit and Memphis.

ALPA spokesman Paul Omodt said that the union would not extend the contract deadline. Pilots have been without a contract since late 1996 and are demanding substantial wage increases to compensate for a 15 percent pay cut the union granted the company when it was reportedly near bankruptcy in 1993. The company has had four straight years of record profits, including \$119 million in the first six months of 1998.

ALPA also wants to eliminate the two-tier wage scale for pilots. New pilots earn \$24,000 a year and must work for five years to reach the higher pay scales of senior pilots, which average \$120,000 a year.

Pilots are also concerned about job security as the

company establishes new relations with other airlines, such as the proposed alliance with Continental Airlines. Northwest pilots fear that lower paid Continental pilots will be used for the bulk of the new routes that emerge from the alliance. ALPA wants guarantees that NWA pilots will have a specific share of flights. Northwest is also increasingly using small, regional jets flown by its Airlink feeder, Mesaba Airlines. ALPA wants to limit the number of regional jets in the NWA system to 9 percent of the carrier's fleet.

In 1993 unions representing 42,000 Northwest employees agreed to \$900 million in concessions. In return three unions, including ALPA, gained a seat on the company's board of directors, which they still hold.

NWA management is determined to keep wage increases to a minimum and is preparing for a long strike. NWA hired former Continental Airlines President Mickey Foret, who smashed the unions there in the late 1980s, to prepare Northwest for a strike. With a line of credit from the Wall Street banks, the company has a \$3 billion war chest and has said it can weather a 300-day strike. The company has concluded a deal with 50 worldwide airlines and other transportation companies, like Amtrak rail service, to service Northwest ticketholders.

The company has also hinted that it would favor a strike-breaking intervention by the Clinton administration. Early last year Clinton became the first president in three decades to invoke the Railway Labor Act against an airline work stoppage, when he stopped the strike by 9,300 pilots at American Airlines minutes after it began. Clinton could delay any strike by 60 days and appoint a Presidential Emergency Board to recommend a settlement.

Meanwhile the company received a temporary restraining order to stop a planned protest rally by machinists and ground crew in front of its terminal in Minneapolis. In the Netherlands, a court ruled that pilots at KLM (the Dutch airline which is in a corporate alliance with Northwest) could not carry out a sympathy strike in support of the NWA pilots. However, the KLM pilots

have voted overwhelmingly not to fly extra segments to undermine a NWA strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with pilots at an informational picket at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport Friday. Mark Sturgill, an ALPA media representative in Detroit, told the WSWS, 'One of our major concerns is job security. The company is establishing global alliances, and we want to have a share in the jobs of their new routes. If Northwest adds a route in Europe, let's say from Amsterdam to Berlin, they have an agreement with KLM to fly a KLM jet with one of their pilots. We want to make it that another route is added for one of our pilots.'

'Right now we have what is called a scope clause to guarantee job security, but the company wants to get rid of it so they can carry out unlimited outsourcing. Back in the 1970s when the airline industry was deregulated the companies outsourced to Air Bermuda and the Philippines. This was to play one section of pilots against another to get lower wages and higher output. That is why we got the clause in there.'

Another pilots' spokesman, Roy Schooler, a 727 captain in Detroit, said, 'The KLM pilots have set up a strike center in Amsterdam to support us. What the airlines are doing is carrying out mergers without actually merging. Northwest has an alliance with Mesaba and American West, and is seeking one with Continental. They are setting up a global route structure, so you can start off flying one airline, and then fly one or two others before you reach your destination.'

'Northwest downsized and now many older pilots are retiring. The layoffs have made it almost impossible to keep up with the workload. So Northwest tried to get the pilots at Mesaba to fly their smaller planes on our routes. But the Mesaba pilots, who are our union brothers, refused to do it. We want the jobs to grow as the company grows; that's why we are against outsourcing.'



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