

Airline pilots strike Northwest

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30 August 1998

Negotiators for Northwest Airlines and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) failed to reach a contract agreement triggering a strike by 6,150 pilots late Friday evening, August 28. ALPA had called on its pilots to remain at their workstations until noon Saturday in the event that the two sides returned to the bargaining table, but when the hour passed and company negotiators did not make themselves available the union issued the call for all pilots to leave their posts and return home. NWA announced earlier that it was canceling all Sunday flights.



Northwest Airlines pilots picket in Detroit on the first day of their strike

The strike crippled the nation's fourth largest airline which provides 12 percent of US air service. NWA controls three-quarters of the flights out of Minneapolis, Detroit and Memphis, Tennessee. The shutdown of NWA and its Airlink regional feeder service eliminates 2,640 daily departures at 223 airports in the US, Europe, Asia and India, and disrupts the transport of some 2.9 million pounds of cargo per day, including the US mail.

ALPA called on workers for the International Association of Machinists (IAM) representing clerks, groundworkers and mechanics, and Teamsters representing flight attendants to report to work as usual. ALPA claims this strategy will weaken the company because NWA will be forced to pay wages although no planes are flying, or unemployment benefits once they lay the workers off. It is expected that Northwest might begin laying off non-striking employees as early as Monday.

One hour before the 11:00 p.m. CST strike deadline, NWA held a press conference to present what they claimed was their final offer to ALPA: A four year

contract with a 3 percent pay increase upon signing and subsequent increases of 2 percent, 1.5 percent and 2.5 percent; the reduction of the 'B scale' which is a lower tiered wage of \$24,000 a year for new hires from 5 years to 3 years; lump sum payments equal to 3.5 percent of annual pay; profit sharing of up to 5 percent of pay.

Paul Omodt, spokesman for ALPA responded, 'What they put out is wildly untrue and unspecific.' Omodt emphasized the lack of job security provisions in the contract. Northwest's proposed use of regional jets at Mesaba Airlines, its regional affiliate, would result in the transfer of hundreds of jobs away from NWA. 'We did not save this airline in 1993 to have our jobs outsourced in 1998,' Omodt declared.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Sally Welch, a Northwest pilot serving as a spokesperson picketing the Minneapolis-St. Paul terminal. She concurred that NWA's presentation of the contract issues were distorted. 'For instance, Northwest wanted to phase the 'B scale' in over a long period of time. It's ridiculous. It would be the worst in the industry. We want to eliminate it entirely. We don't want a caste system on this property. We should be treated equally. Every other airline has eliminated it.

Concerning wages, Welch discounted NWA's claim that pilots would have parity with the rest of the industry. 'That assumes that the rest of the industry will have wage freezes in their new contracts.' Negotiations with other major carriers will begin as soon as January 1999.

Welch said that the 1989 contract, while good for its time, was no longer sufficient in the present expansion of the airline industry. 'We feel we can build language into the contract that will allow the company to grow and at the same time protect us. What we're saying is that if new flights are contracted by Northwest, we don't want KLM to get all of it. We want to share in

any expansion. We think that's fair.'

Upon the calling of the strike, the Clinton administration announced it would not intervene. The statement only held out the possibility of an intervention under the 1926 Railway Labor Act, if the situation 'threatens substantially to interrupt interstate commerce to such a degree as to deprive any section of the country of essential transportation service.' Industry watchers said he may act before the busy Labor Day weekend.

The strike at Northwest is the culmination of a protracted struggle that goes back to the late 1980's when a leveraged buyout of the airline saddled it with debt. In 1993, workers gave up \$900 million, along with money from the state of Minnesota to bail out Northwest. In exchange for the concessions, ALPA and other unions were given seats of the company's board of directors.

The present negotiations have dragged on three years under conditions where the company has made record profits. Workers have staged slowdowns in protest over NWA's stalling tactics.

The machinists' union, representing the largest portion of NWA employees, proved unable to force through a contract proposed by management at the end of July. The stormy contract meetings led to a resounding defeat of the proposal. Now the IAM, whose workers have been without a contract for more than two years, have appealed to the Federal Mediation Board to declare an impasse in the negotiations, thus setting a 30-day deadline for a strike. There is also a movement among IAM workers to disaffiliate with the union and join another.

Northwest management is showing no intentions of granting the pilots' demands, and is digging in for a long battle. Anticipating a difficult struggle, some nine of Northwest's executives cashed in stock options earlier this year for a total value of \$57 million. The company secured \$2 billion in loans from Wall Street bringing their war chest for conducting the strike to some \$3 billion.

A spokesman for the NWA pilots in Detroit told the WSWS, 'The pilots continue to be unified, and we're in continuous communication with the other unions. There hasn't been any negotiations since 4:30 yesterday afternoon. At 11:30 am the company gave their final offer. We presented a counter offer, but the company

representatives were gone by 4:30 yesterday afternoon. They're offering 9 percent over four years. But what about the two previous years? The contract covers close to seven years, so it breaks down to 1.25 per year. It's crazy. We're not the ones to leverage the company, but we're the ones who repaired it.'

A member of the IAM said that the union is asking the arbitrator for a release from the 30 day countdown. He was critical of ALPA's decision not to urge all 50,000 NWA employees to join the strike. 'The pilots union doesn't want any of the other unions striking, because they're afraid the company will lose too much money.' He also stated his displeasure with the IAM. 'The mechanics want out of this union really bad. We feel they're afraid to strike. They take your union dues and don't do anything.'



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