

# Clinton's transportation secretary intervenes in Northwest pilots' strike

Jerry White  
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Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater met with Northwest Airlines chief executive John Dasburg and Air Line Pilots Association leaders Tuesday as the Clinton administration took its first major step towards ending the four-day strike against the nation's fourth largest carrier.

Negotiations between NWA management and the union have broken down, amidst clear signs that the airline is determined to weather a long strike, if necessary, to press ahead with its cost-cutting measures. A spokesman for the transportation secretary said the aim of the meeting was to let the White House 'understand why the parties, which have said that they both wish to go back to the bargaining table, have not done so.'

The meeting was convened the day after a number of Republican officials from states affected by the strike called on Clinton to use his federal powers to order the pilots back to work. Under the 1926 Railway Labor Act, Clinton could call a 60-day 'cooling off' period and appoint a presidential emergency board to recommend a settlement, as he did last year in a strike by American Airlines pilots.

On Monday Republican Senate leader Trent Lott denounced Clinton for failing to order the striking pilots back to work. Lott, whose home state of Mississippi is affected by the shutdown of Northwest's hub in Memphis, said, 'I think the president was wrong not to intervene.' Lott noted that amid the global economic chaos that is hitting US businesses, 'this is just one more thing that causes problems for our economy.'

Lott's comments were echoed by Michigan Governor John Engler who had earlier said the Northwest strike, coupled with a strike by GM workers in Flint, was discouraging business investment in the state. Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson, while stopping short of calling for immediate presidential intervention, proposed to White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles that an independent analyst evaluate the financial effects of the

union's contract demands, to make sure they would not 'cripple' the airline. Carlson said he might call on the president to step in at a later date if the economic impact worsened.

NWA management has pressed for presidential strikebreaking, saying that a 10-day strike would cause \$700 million in economic damage and leave 700,000 passengers stranded. Analysts say the strike is costing NWA \$30 million a day in lost passengers.

On Monday Transportation Secretary Slater met with Gene Sperling, chairman of the National Economic Council, and other senior White House aides to discuss the economic effects on the first business day of the strike. A command center has been set up at the Transportation Department with a crisis team gathering up-to-date information from airlines and airports across the country.

In a prepared statement issued as he flew to Moscow, Clinton said, 'Senior members of my administration continue to be in contact with the parties, but it is up to the negotiating parties to reach an agreement.' Administration officials had earlier strongly hinted that the president might intervene to halt the strike if it appears the walkout would disrupt Labor Day holiday travel this weekend.

However, a federal mediator involved in the negotiations, who is responsible for making any recommendation for presidential intervention, has said she does not support an intervention at this juncture. Magdalena Jacobsen said if this occurred, the pilots could reject an emergency board's proposal and walk out again in two months on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday.

The administration is also concerned about growing opposition from Northwest mechanics, ground crew and flight attendants, who, like the pilots, have been without a contract and pay raises for two years. If Clinton steps in to break the strike now, not only would this provoke the

anger of all the NWA workers, but it could lead to further outbreaks of rank-and-file protest, such as the slowdowns by machinists last spring. At this point the Clinton administration prefers to rely on the leadership of the ALPA union to wrap up the strike on management's terms and avert a walkout by the other unions.

For its part, the ALPA leadership is seeking to cultivate the belief that the pilots can look to the Clinton administration for support against the airline. Paul Omodt, an ALPA spokesman, hailed the meeting with Clinton's transportation secretary, saying that Slater was 'using his good offices, and knowing our relationship with him, it could play a positive role.'

In fact, Clinton and his transportation secretary have carried out measures which have benefited the airline companies and their Wall Street investors at the direct expense of pilots and other airline workers. The Department of Transportation is proposing new guidelines that would make it tougher for established, unionized airlines to enter new markets, while granting slots to low-cost nonunion carriers. So transparent is the administration's support for the continuing undercutting of pilots' wages and benefits, that the ALPA leadership has been forced to say this measure 'echoes, the harsh anti-labor sentiments espoused by the original proponents of airline deregulation.'

In fact, Clinton is part of a long line of Democrats--starting with President Jimmy Carter and the Democratic Congress who enacted airline deregulation in 1978, in legislation sponsored by Senator Edward Kennedy--who have aided the airline companies in the destruction of workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions.

See Also:

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