

Ansett New Zealand pilots face lockout

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Ansett New Zealand has issued notices of an indefinite lockout of pilots from September 16 after advertising their jobs in Australia and on the Internet. The pilots have been involved in a month-long struggle with Ansett over proposed job cuts and extended working hours. The company issued the notices after pilots announced they would take 24-hour strike action on September 13.

Negotiations between the company and the Airline Pilots Association, broke down last week when Ansett refused to admit four pilots into the talks as observers. The pilots were entitled to attend under a negotiations protocol agreed between the company and the union.

Ansett chief executive Kevin Dodrell claimed that the company did not oppose the discussions being “transparent,” but that it was “entirely inappropriate” for sensitive contract discussions to be held in an “open forum”.

Dodrell went on to say that the union “has stated that it is working hard to retain terms and conditions which its members have enjoyed for the last ten years. These are the very conditions which are costing the airline an annual premium of over \$NZ4.5 million. We are not prepared to continue paying that premium”.

Pilots have struck three times in the past month, shutting down the airline for 24 hours at a time. On each occasion, 100 flights have had to be canceled, costing the company \$700,000 a day in lost sales, with total losses now at \$2.2 million.

Ansett is attempting to cut its pilot numbers, currently 146, by 35 and to force its remaining pilots to work longer hours by rostering them an extra two days per month. The company is also proposing to ease flight and duty time limits.

An Ansett spokesman denied last week that it was formally preparing for a lockout. However, the international advertisements state that pilots are “urgently required” for three-month contracts, with a

provision for a further three-month extension, beginning in September. Recruitment agency Rishworth Aviation, which is handling the contract, is advertising for captains and first officers for Ansett's Whisper Jet Bae-146 and Boeing Dash aircraft.

Airline Pilots Association advocate Adam Nicholson said Ansett had deliberately set out to scuttle the negotiations and lock out the pilots. “This is about destroying the pilots' conditions of employment and preparing the company for sale”.

Ansett New Zealand has rarely been out of the red since it was established by its Australian parent company in competition with the country's major airline, Air New Zealand, during the deregulation boom of the 1980s. It has concentrated on main trunk services between the larger national centers, but has lost hundreds of millions of dollars over the past decade.

The strike by Ansett pilots, however, is not a single company issue. Just last month, Air New Zealand international and domestic pilots struck for a day against attempts by Air New Zealand to enforce significant cuts to contract provisions for its pilots. Attacks on the working conditions of airline pilots have become industry-wide as competition for profits escalates.

The union has assisted the airline companies by keeping the pilots' struggles limited in scope and isolated from each other. On each occasion, the strikes have not seriously affected national air travel capacity because passenger bookings have been transferred to flights being operated by the rival carrier.



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