

Ansett New Zealand pilots fight company lockout

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Airline pilots employed by Ansett New Zealand are engaged in a bitter battle against company plans to carry through job cuts and attacks on working conditions. The company has locked out 125 pilots since September 15 in a determined effort to break the pilots' resistance.

Ansett, one of New Zealand's two national air carriers, wants to cut pilot numbers from 146 to 111, 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, weaken superannuation provisions and cut pay rates by between \$NZ4,000 and \$10,000 in a bid to reduce its wage bill by \$4.7 million a year.

The company imposed the lockout after the fourth in a series of 24-hour strikes called by the Airline Pilots' Association, and a week of unofficial "sickouts" (pilots phoning in sick), which grounded nearly 600 flights and brought Ansett's losses to over \$5 million since the beginning of August. Services have been reduced by two-thirds during the current two-week school holiday period.

A recruiting company, Rishworth Aviation, and the Civil Aviation Authority have both confirmed that the company has sought approval to employ pilots recruited overseas to extend its present limited services and undermine the lockout.

So far Ansett has maintained only minimal flights on the main trunk routes by using a dozen pilots who have signed the new contract. These include three management pilots, two non-union pilots and a handful of union members. Late last week, Ansett demanded that the pilots' website be disconnected by its Internet provider when the identities of the scabs keeping the airline flying were revealed on the site. The union has disclaimed any responsibility for the website.

The pilots have voted almost unanimously to reject the new contracts, but Ansett is sending its offers separately to individual pilots. According to the union, the company is offering promotions to pilots who sign the contracts, and threatening to blacklist those who do not as "industrial malcontents".

Ansett New Zealand was set up in competition with Air New Zealand during the period of economic deregulation in the 1980s. The company has barely been out of the red during its existence and has lost millions of dollars on its services.

Transport Minister Maurice Williamson earlier encouraged Ansett to bring in pilots from overseas to undermine industrial action. Now he has warned that Ansett might pull out of New Zealand altogether if the pilots do not agree to its demands. "They (Ansett) are quite clear about having to restructure the company and get some realistic terms and conditions out of their pilots or they can't stay. I would imagine the owners are starting to get a little bit tetchy and say... if this goes on for too much longer we might be best to cut our losses," he said.

According to union representatives, News Corporation owned by Rupert Murdoch, the principal shareholder in Ansett, has been pushing for the company's restructuring as part of plans to sell it off. Newscorp chairman Ken Cowley flew to Auckland last week to supervise Ansett's strategy during the lockout.

Cowley is being assisted by management consultant Francis Wevers, a former leading official in the Public Service Association and Wellington region chairman of the Combined State Unions. Wevers is one of a number of senior union bureaucrats who shifted easily from one side of the bargaining table to the other over the past decade. He established his own industrial relations consultancy in the wake of the deregulation of the state

sector by Labour governments in the 1980s.

The Airline Pilots Association has been seeking to find a way to shut down the dispute with two conciliatory offers to Ansett management in as many weeks. Firstly, the pilots' union suggested that it was prepared to halt all action if the company agreed to negotiate a new contract through a mediator. When that was rejected, the union leaders offered their members as a free workforce for Ansett during the school holidays, saying the "disruption to the public's holiday plans is of major concern". It was also knocked back.

The union failed to close down air transport by calling out Air New Zealand pilots, who are themselves involved in contract negotiations and took strike action to defend conditions less than a month before the Ansett dispute. Air New Zealand is picking up business being lost by Ansett and running extra flights.



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