

US Airways and union reach agreement

Flight attendants speak on issues

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The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) and US Airways reached a tentative agreement early Saturday morning, averting a threatened strike and shutdown of the airline.

Neither AFA officials nor management are releasing the full details of the new five-year agreement, but a statement by US Airways praised the union leadership for a contract that “allows the company to compete in the marketplace.” The contract contains an 11 percent pay raise, the first 5 percent of which will be paid as a signing bonus, with 2 percent raises after 18, 30 and 42 months. Union officials have not made clear if the signing bonus will be added to base pay.

Pay was one of the major issues in the contract. Flight attendants have not had a raise in four years. Starting flight attendants only earn \$17,145 a year and the salary increases to \$36,918 only after 14 years. The last time the workers received a raise was in 1996, and that only restored a pay cut granted earlier by the union to help the airline avoid bankruptcy.

According to union officials the contract also eliminates provisions that cut the pensions of married flight attendants and includes an agreement by the company to more fairly administer the federal Family and Medical Leave Act.

Company spokespersons refused to say whether the airline received concessions in scheduling and work rules that the airline said it required to remain competitive. But Jeff Zack, a union spokesman, said the agreement contained work-rule changes on scheduling, which the airline sought to increase productivity. “The airline says it's cost-competitive,” Zack said. “That's what we wanted to help them achieve.”

Bargainers for the union and the airline stayed at the table for more than three hours past the 12:01 strike deadline. The tentative agreement must still be

approved by the union's master council and then it will be sent out for the approval of the membership in a mail-in ballot. The process could take up to 45 days.

Flight attendants threatened to strike the airline when a federally-mandated “cooling-off” period ended Saturday morning. In an operation dubbed CHAOS—Create Havoc Around Our System—the union said it would randomly strike some of the airline's busiest routes.

The nearly 10,000 flight attendants have been working without a new contract since their old agreement expired at the end of 1996. In February the National Mediation Board, which oversees negotiations in the airline industry under the Railroad Labor Act, declared a 30-day “cooling-off” period.

US Airways threatened to completely shut down if no agreement were reached, laying off all 35,000 employees, rather than face random strikes. US Airways is the nation's sixth largest carrier and accounts for one third of all flights in the East Coast. On average 153,000 people travel on the airline each day. At its two main hubs in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Charlotte, North Carolina the airline accounts for 90 percent of the flights.

Thousands of flight attendants took part in candlelight vigils at airports along the East Coast Friday night as the strike deadline approached.

For many of the nearly 1,000 flight attendants who took part in a rally and vigil at a shopping center near the Pittsburgh International Airport Friday night, the main issue was pay.

“How can they ask us to take concessions when Wolf [US Airways chairman] gives himself a 500 percent bonus?” asked Bill Gosselin, with three years service. “They say that they need to keep the airline competitive, but they just want us to give concessions

so that the management can get a bigger raise.

“The first year I worked with the airline I was living in a house with five other people. They want us to take a smaller piece of the pie so that they can have a bigger one. Why should we take a pay cut when Wolf made \$35 million last year.

“An attendant can fly anywhere from one to six legs [flights] a day. Usually you will fly three. Most of the time you stay away from home for four days. You get 12 hours off before the next day and that includes your meals, travel and sleep time. You will be lucky if you get eight hours of good rest. The company pays for the hotel but they put you up in the cheapest hotels and sometimes in bad neighborhoods. There will be a lot of noise and it is hard to get a good night's sleep.”

Vernon Webb, with 15 years, agreed. “They want us to take ‘parity plus 1,’ but that means that we would not know what we would be making.” (Under the company's proposal flight attendants would be paid the same as the average pay of workers at other major airlines, plus 1 percent.) “We are already paying for the mistakes of our management, we don't want to pay for the mistakes of their management too.

“Look which airlines we would be matched with. Delta is a nonunion carrier and if they start losing money management could walk in one day and announce a pay cut and that would mean our pay would be cut too. At Northwest and American airlines the flight attendants have rejected their tentative contracts and wages at United are up for review. That means we would not know what our pay is going to be.

“It is just corporate greed,” said Rick Fanco, with 14 years service. “My concern is the Family and Medical Leave Act. According to the company we have to work 1,250 hours a year to be eligible for any leave. That is impossible for us.

“The way the company counts hours is from when the door on the plane closes to when it opens again at the other end. All the time we spend getting the plane ready, seating the passengers and then helping people off doesn't count. According to them I have never worked that many hours in a year. Working 100 hours a month is a lot. For every 20 hours pay you get, you spend 80 hours away from home.”

Many flight attendants are also concerned about the growth of the use of what the airline calls “reserves.”

“In Pittsburgh a flight attendant must work 11 years

before getting off the reserve list,” said Jim Wilson, a flight attendant with 15 years. “Basically a flight attendant must have a beeper and a phone at all times and he or she can be called at any time and told to get on a flight. Say a single mother who had made babysitting arrangements while she was gone on a four-day tour could get home and be called and told that she has to go out for another two days.

“It seems the reserve list is growing. You now have to have 11 years seniority before you can bid off the list and each year it is taking longer and longer.

“People think that this is a glamorous job. When I tell my neighbors that I am flying to California they think that this is a vacation, but it is work. Maybe I only work 18 days a month, but when I am gone I am gone for the entire day. When we were younger maybe that was all right, but a lot of us are getting older and we now have families. We have made a career out of this and we need to be treated that way. What is a mother missing when she is gone for four days at a time—maybe the first words of her baby, maybe the first step.”



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