

Northwest Airlines fires flight attendants accused of organizing job action

"The company loves to use these intimidation tactics"

Cory Johnson, Jerry White
14 March 2000

Northwest Airlines announced March 8 that they have fired 12 flight attendants for allegedly organizing a sick-out over New Year's to protest failed contract negotiations. Teamsters Local 2000, which represents 11,000 flight attendants at Northwest, put the figure of fired attendants at 18, along with another 6 attendants who resigned following interrogation by company officials.

The firings stem from a suit filed by Northwest which alleges that Teamsters Local 2000 and some 21 individuals conspired to organize the job action, which the airline says caused the cancellation of over 300 flights. A federal judge gave Northwest the power to hire a third party to confiscate the personal computers of the 21 defendants and search for information to support the company's allegations. Northwest indicated that electronic mail and the Internet played a role in instigating the sick-out.

The fired flight attendants are based in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Honolulu and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul. "Northwest loves to use these intimidation tactics," one flight attendant in Honolulu told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We knew it was just a matter of time. This is the way the company operates. But we won't be frightened. After the firings, one flight attendant organized a protest last Friday at an appearance of Vice President Al Gore in Bloomington, Minnesota. She held up a sign saying, '18 down, 10,982 to go!'"

The Teamsters announced they would file grievances on behalf of the fired attendants who come from Local 2000. Local President Billie Davenport said that none of the sick calls were falsified. But many flight attendants believe this is an empty gesture, and that the

union will do little or nothing to defend the victimized workers. "The time for grievances is long past," an attendant told the WSWS.

The local president clearly disassociated the union from the job action. "Not one flight attendant has said the union encouraged them to call in sick or told them to call in sick," she said. "This had nothing to do with anything with the union." The statement reflects a concern that Northwest is attempting to obtain a ruling similar to the \$45 million court-ordered fine against the American Airline pilots union as a result of their sick-out one year ago. Moreover, the union officials also see the firings as a means of dampening rank-and-file dissent and opposition to their efforts to push through a pro-company contract.

More than four years of fruitless negotiations have deeply angered most workers, while the company has raked in record profits. The bitterness is compounded by the fact that workers' concessions in the early 1990s helped Northwest overcome economic troubles. Last June the Teamsters and Northwest reached a tentative agreement that fell far short of rank-and-file expectations. Despite endorsement by Teamsters International President James Hoffa and Local 2000, the contract went down to defeat by a 69 percent margin. A group of rank-and-file activists using the Internet to maintain communication played a prominent role in galvanizing opposition to the agreement.

A new round of negotiations was halted last December by a federal mediator who sided with Northwest and called the union's new contract demands unreasonable. Contract talks were broken off with speculation that they might not resume for months. These were the conditions in the lead-up to the New

Year's incident.

In a related event, two of the flight attendants that had their computers confiscated filed an appeal March 9 in US District Court in St. Paul. Lawyers for Kevin Griffin, of Honolulu, and Ted Reeve, of North Hollywood, California, charged the company with engaging in a fishing expedition that violated privacy rights. The normal procedure for legal discovery, they claim, would have been to allow the defendants to turn over relevant documents instead of allowing a third party to confiscate all papers and electronic records.

Lawyers charge that the keywords used to search the defendants' hard drives were not specific. They claim Northwest lacked evidence to back up its charges in the sick-out suit and "was relentlessly attempting to expand the scope of discovery in the hope that the broadest of fishing nets would catch some possible wrongdoing that could justify having brought the case against Griffin and Reeve in the first place."

Griffin and Reeve run personal web sites that serve to inform flight attendants and allow an exchange of ideas. Activity on the sites revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the Teamsters bureaucracy's role in the contract negotiations. The Teamsters leadership provided lawyers for 19 of the defendants—mostly union officials—in the suit, but refused legal defense to Griffin and Reeve.

Kevin Griffin recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"Even though there had been an earlier agreement to halt the searching of some computers, Northwest's attorneys violated it and continued to search the hard drives of selected people to see if there was any information that might lead them to Ted Reeves or myself," Griffin said. "There were 16 base representatives from the Contract Action Team and other volunteers who were under discovery. So were the vice president and president of Local 2000, but their hard drives were never searched.

"Under the temporary restraining order I could have faced fines or even jail time if anyone posted anything illegal or what could be interpreted as illegal on my web site. The investigation drove everybody to be anonymous on our web sites. I was surprised by the extent to which they could go. I have a big difference with the judge on this. He says a computer is no different from a filing drawer. But what drawer has the

equivalent of 3.2 million pages of text? They didn't search the company computers or the top union officials'; they did a search of my personal hard drive.

"If Northwest could stop us and win by intimidation, then no one would stand up to them. The Internet has been the best thing for flight attendants to communicate. Geographically we are all over the world. Before we were even in different locals. But now we can act together. We don't always agree, but we learn information in a timelier manner. Before it took three years to know what the union and management was up to. Our communications put pressure on both. That's why they want to shut us down.

"The union did not stand up for the majority. It rolled over. That's because they had tried to push through a tentative agreement and it failed. They were happy when we were under the Temporary Restraining Order because it would help them push through the next contract. That's what they are counting on now.

"The union has not provided any legal help. As far as they are concerned we should shut up and go away. We're fighting the union, not just the company. By communicating on the Internet we have seen that the union represents a different class, they are not for us. The officials, who have been there for years, are only concerned about filling their own pockets."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact