

Flight attendants union granted major concessions to avoid US Airways strike

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Details are beginning to emerge about the concessions the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) gave to US Airways in order to reach a tentative agreement last Saturday, March 25 and avert a strike by 10,000 union members against the nation's sixth largest airline.

Before the deal was reached US Airways management had threatened to shut down its entire operations rather than face random strikes on the carrier's busiest routes. The deal was reached three hours after the expiration of a midnight deadline following round-the-clock talks between AFA President Lynn Lenosky and company President Rakesh Gangwol, under the auspices of a federal mediator.

Announcing the deal Lenosky said the “contract is a five-year agreement flight attendants can be proud of.” She emphasized the 5 percent signing bonus and 11 percent raise over the life of the contract, the first pay increase for flight attendants since 1996. Top AFL-CIO officials, who reportedly participated in the last-minute efforts to avert a strike, echoed Lenosky's statements, with AFL-CIO President John Sweeney commending the “solidarity of the flight attendants” for “standing up to a profitable company.”

What details have emerged, however, paint a very different picture. In a contract summary posted on the AFA's web site the union's negotiating committee lists various concessions on work rules, scheduling, vacation benefits and sick leave that will enable management to boost productivity and further cut costs.

For example, the AFA agreed to reduce accrued sick leave to 5 hours a month from 5 1/4 hours. The union also agreed to reduce accruals for vacation by one day a year for flight attendants with 1 to 29 years seniority. Attendants would only regain the lost days in their

thirtieth year of service.

In addition, the union agreed to the company's demands that reserve flight attendants—generally lower seniority workers who are “on call”—work beyond the limit of 30 hours in a seven-day period. This is particularly onerous because working hours are only counted from when the door on the plane closes to when it opens again at the other end of the trip. All the time spent getting the plane ready, seating the passengers and then helping people off doesn't count. As one US Airways attendant said, “For every 20 hours' pay you get, you spend 80 hours away from home.” The new contract provisions will only make matters much worse.

In addition, the union agreed to a huge cut in the maximum length of disability coverage for injured workers. In the past attendants could receive a maximum disability payment of \$2,350 a month for up to seven years. The new tentative agreement reduces the maximum coverage to only two years.

While details are sketchy, particularly because the summary by the negotiating committee only lists their “highlights,” it is clear that the union gave up major concessions. The union officials all but acknowledge this in the letter to flight attendants preceding the summary.

“In the final hours, we had to make some tough decisions. We reduced or gave up some items in which we have traditionally enjoyed significant advantages over all of the other flight attendants in the industry. We assure you, though, that we kept those changes to a minimum compared to the company's demands.”

With the assistance of the AFA and other unions at the airlines, over the past five years US Airways has returned to profitability after facing near bankruptcy in the early 1990s. While flight attendants have forgone

pay raises and other benefits, US Airways' top executives have received increases and bonuses up to 500 percent. CEO Stephen Wolf, a veteran cost-cutter originally from Northwest and United Airlines, made \$35 million in 1998, most of it in stock awards and options.

US Airways management, concerned that gloating might provoke rank-and-file opposition, has said little about what it achieved. In a statement by US Airways after the deal was reached, management praised the AFA leadership for avoiding an interruption in service and reaching an agreement that allowed the company to “compete in the marketplace.”

The AFA's Master Executive Council is currently discussing the tentative agreement and will vote on whether to recommend it to the membership. Rank-and-file flight attendants will vote on the deal over the next month.



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