Northwest Airlines flight attendants ratify agreement

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Northwest Airlines flight attendants ratified a new five-year agreement by a 68 percent margin last week, with some 87 percent of 11,000 members of Teamsters Local 2000 voting. The agreement provides for initial pay raises of from 8 to 27.7 percent with the higher raises distributed to the lowest paid flight attendants.

Northwest has been notorious for retaining a lower tier "B" scale for new employees, amounting to a mere $15,000 yearly compensation that qualified some attendants for food stamps and forced others to work a second job. The highest salaried attendants under the old agreement were paid around $40,000. On average, over the next four years pay increases would total 10.5 percent with raises being increased every 12 months.

Pensions are to be immediately increased by 86 percent from a rate of $35 to $65. The pension rate is multiplied times the number of years of service to determine monthly retirement payments. Other issues include an increase in the number of guaranteed hours for reserve attendants from 70 hours a month to 75 hours. An additional paid holiday was added. In a concession to the company, flight attendants may now be required to wait at an airport for possible reserve duty. Health insurance benefits will now be available not only to families but extended to domestic partners.

The wage increase is to place Northwest second to Delta Air Lines in terms of highest pay, although the five-year agreement leaves room for upcoming contracts at other airlines to surpass this mark. The agreement received the usual plaudits from Teamsters international President James Hoffa and Local 2000 President Billie Davenport. But whatever gains made in the agreement were in spite of the Teamsters bureaucracy. From the beginning the union leadership fought to frustrate and beat down a considerable determination on the part of flight attendants to achieve a contract that addressed their concerns.

The effort to force through a substandard contract by the Teamsters last year was given a sharp rebuke when 69 percent of the membership voted against it. Northwest then broke off talks in December. Over the New Years holiday Northwest was forced to cancel 30 percent of its flights and charged the union with conspiring to call an illegal sick-out. Under the cover of a federal lawsuit the company launched a witch-hunt against militant workers.

The Teamsters bureaucracy acted to protect its officials against financial damages, while abandoning rank-and-file members who had proven to be obstacles to the union's collaboration with management. With the backing of a judge's court order, investigators hired by Northwest seized the computers of two flight attendants, Ted Reeve and Kevin Griffin, who ran web sites devoted to uniting union members for a decent contract. Their computer hard drives were copied and searched for incriminating evidence. A leader of the opposition was removed from the negotiating committee for communicating to union members the bargaining position of the bureaucracy. A dozen flight attendants were terminated or forced to resign by Northwest and it is not clear that the Teamsters made any provisions in the final agreement to get their jobs back.

In the end, many of the low-paid, low-seniority flight attendants admitted they voted for the agreement because they could not financially hold out any longer. "I need the money now," one attendant told the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* newspaper. Others concluded that a better agreement could not be reached under the Teamsters leadership. But despite the company onslaught and the betrayals of the Teamsters officials, a considerable number of flight attendants still

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recorded their opposition by voting against the agreement.

The experience at Northwest speaks volumes about the degeneration of the labor bureaucracy. During the 1990s workers at Northwest, under pressure from the company, media and their unions, gave emergency concessions to help Northwest avert bankruptcy. While the company returned to record profitability—and executives reaped gigantic bonuses, salaries and cashed in stock options—the airline, aided by the complicity of the unions, balked at settling contracts when management reopened talks in 1996.

In 1998, the attempt by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to force down an inferior contract led mechanics and cleaners to dump the union and bring in the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association. Like the flight attendants, several mechanics found themselves victimized by dismissals. The remnant of clerks and office personal still in the IAM were later forced to accept essentially the same contract.

In 1998 the pilots went out on strike in an effort to win their demands. Separate agreements were also carried out in isolation for meteorologists, flight dispatchers and technical support workers. Mechanics and cleaners are still without a contract.

The recent merger announcements involving United Airlines and US Airways, and American Airlines and Northwest, are a sign of a new round of consolidation in the airline industry that will inevitably result in a renewed assault on workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions.

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