

Bush bans strike by Northwest Airlines mechanics

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President George W. Bush will legally prohibit Northwest Airlines mechanics from striking if they do not reach a contractual agreement by March 13. This decision reverses a National Mediation Board (NMB) ruling that would have allowed union members to walk off the job that day. The presidential mandate extends the legally required "cooling-off" period for another 60 days, forcing workers to remain on the job through at least mid-May.

A White House spokesman stated: "If this dispute is not settled ... the president will accept the recommendation of the National Mediation Board to create a presidential emergency board. The president is concerned about an airline strike that could threaten the economy." According to another White House spokesman, such a board would have the power to end strike action for another 60 days while it considers non-binding recommendations for a settlement.

Bush appears ready to follow the Clinton administration's lead in relation to airline disputes. In February 1997 American Airlines pilots walked off the job, after waiting months to be in a legal strike position as dictated by the Railway Labor Act. Within five minutes of their walkout, Clinton intervened with an emergency decree ordering them back to work. The pilots went on to ratify an unfavorable agreement, supervised by government-appointed negotiators, or face the threat that Congress might impose an even worse deal.

Steve MacFarlane, president of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association Local 33 at Northwest, said his members were disappointed and disturbed by Bush's decision. The union, which represents about 9,500 mechanics and cleaners at the airline, previously issued a statement expressing its opposition to the appointment of a presidential

emergency board.

Mechanics are also involved in difficult negotiations with United Airlines, the world's largest carrier. Both sides in the dispute are being told to appear before the National Mediation Board next week. A spokesman for the International Association of Machinists, representing 15,000 United mechanics, said there has been no communication recently between the two sides. The contract expired last July, and the union has asked the NMB to declare an impasse, giving workers the right to strike.

Northwest is only one of four airlines threatened with strike action, with Delta, American and United also involved in contract disputes. These companies carry a combined total of more than two-thirds of the 588 million passengers traveling annually by air in the United States.

The Airlines Pilots Association International, which represents the 9,800 pilots at Delta Air Lines, have asked the mediation board to allow it to strike on April 1 if there is no negotiated settlement by then. Delta pilots voted by a 97-3 margin to authorize strike action. Contract talks between Delta, the No. 3 US airline, and its pilots are continuing under the auspices of the NMB.

Directors of the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, representing 23,000 flight attendants at American Airlines, took a strike authorization vote last month, and will announce the results on February 23. As in the other airline disputes, the flight attendants are barred from striking unless they are released from federal mediation.

US airline workers have increasingly expressed their willingness to take action to reverse the many years of concessions they have endured. Northwest mechanics, frustrated with the leadership of the International Association of Mechanics, voted in 1998 to replace the

union with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association. Sensing the growing anger among airline workers, the union bureaucracy has struck a more militant pose. A national AFL-CIO spokesman asserted recently that if President Bush intervened to prevent airline strikes, it would mean “war” with the unions.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, however, has indicated his willingness to work with Bush. While voicing opposition to some of his right-wing policies, Sweeney commented on the new president at the National Press Club in Washington last week: “We will be the first to applaud him when he does right by the people who do the work that keeps our country going.”

Sweeney further indicated to what degree the union bureaucracy is prepared to collaborate with Bush, stating: “We will spare no effort to work with him to make good on these commitments to advance the interests of working families.”



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