

Bush blocks strike by Northwest Airlines mechanics

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President George W. Bush issued an order Friday blocking a strike by Northwest Airlines mechanics, cleaners and custodians. The workers, members of the Airline Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), were set to strike the fourth largest US airline at 12:01 AM Eastern Standard Time on Monday, following the expiration of a federally mandated cooling-off period.

Bush announced the order, to a round of cheers and applause, at a rally in South Dakota called to promote the centerpiece of his budget plan—a tax cut that will overwhelmingly benefit the richest five percent of Americans. He went on to declare that he would block any section of airline workers from striking.

“I intend to take the necessary steps to prevent airline strikes from happening this year,” the Republican president declared. Typical of the Orwellian “newspeak” employed by the new administration, Bush said he was depriving the 10,000 AMFA members of the right to withhold their labor in order to protect “the hardworking people of America” from travel disruption.

Unionized workers at the four largest airlines in the US have threatened to go on strike in the coming months. In most cases the workers are seeking to recoup lost wages and benefits given up in concessionary contracts in the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s. Over the past several years, the major airlines have recorded record profits, but they have taken a hard line against the wage, benefit and job security demands of their employees.

By intervening in the Northwest dispute in advance of a strike that would otherwise be legally sanctioned under the terms of the Railway Labor Act, Bush becomes only the second president since 1966 to order workers at a major airline to stay on the job. And in making a blanket statement that he will block all airline

strikes, with negotiations still in progress at four major carriers, he is openly marshalling the authority of the federal government behind the airline bosses and undercutting the position of the workers.

Presidential intervention to boost the position of management in airline labor struggles is not entirely new. President Bill Clinton ordered pilots at American Airlines to return to work in 1997 only minutes after they had set up picket lines. But Clinton waited to act until the strike had begun, seeking thereby to maintain some pretence of neutrality and respect for the right of workers to withhold their labor. No president in recent decades, prior to George W. Bush, has issued a blanket statement that he would act to prevent strikes at all airlines.

Even without presidential intervention, the Railway Labor Act severely restricts the right of rail and airline workers to strike, imposing mediation procedures and other requirements that have the effect of delaying possible strike action for months on end. Once the mediation process has been exhausted, however, the workers are legally free to strike in pursuit of a new contract.

The president can, however, intervene under the terms of the Railway Labor Act to outlaw strike action by declaring an emergency. He then appoints a three-member emergency board to make recommendations for a settlement. This is what Bush has done in the Northwest dispute. If an impasse still exists after 60 days, the Republican-controlled Congress will have the legal authority to pass legislation imposing a contract.

Northwest management immediately issued a statement praising Bush's action and saying it was prepared to accept any recommendation made by the emergency board.

The response of union officials to Bush's heavy-

handed anti-labor intervention was notably meek. Steve MacFarlane, president of AMFA Local 33, said, "It means you are no longer a free man. You can't go on strike without his permission." Sonny Hall, president of the transportation trades division of the AFL-CIO, called Bush's action "an inappropriate use of intervention powers."

Other union officials were even more conciliatory. Robert Roach Jr., a general vice president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), which represents more than 130,000 workers at United, Trans World Airlines and other carriers, said, "I don't think we want to interpret for the president what he means and lock him into a position. Let's let things play out."

Northwest mechanics have been without a contract for four years. They are seeking to recover deep concessions given in 1993 during a financial crisis for the airline. Since then Northwest has posted record profits and awarded huge pay increases to top executives, while offering a pittance to workers. The AMFA is seeking a pay increase from \$26.25 to \$36.84 an hour. Northwest has offered an increase to an average of \$31 an hour. Workers are also demanding that any pay increase be retroactive.

Northwest machinists rejected a settlement that included a 14 percent pay increase negotiated by the IAM in 1998, then voted out the IAM and joined AMFA.

A series of major contracts in the airline industry are reaching their final stages:

- * The Airline Pilots Association has asked the federal mediation board for permission to strike Delta Air Lines on April 1 if there is no settlement by that date.

- * At United Airlines, the largest US air carrier, 15,000 mechanics have been without a contract since last July. The International Association of Machinists has asked the mediation board to declare an impasse, a step toward a possible strike. Flight attendants at United have given authorization to strike if the airline goes ahead with a planned purchase of US Airways.

- * Flight attendants at American Airlines voted by a 96 percent margin for strike authorization last month. In addition, the contract for 31,000 American Airlines mechanics, fleet service crew and other workers, members of the Transport Workers Union, expired in March.

Bush's blanket moratorium on airline strikes will have immediate consequences for negotiations at Delta, United and American, encouraging airline executives to take an even harder line.

Friday's intervention against airline workers is entirely in keeping with the general character of the Bush administration, which operates openly and ruthlessly as the representative of a corporate and financial oligarchy. The preemptive strike-breaking at Northwest came just two days after House and Senate Republicans, acting with the support of the White House, overturned new Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards aimed at protecting workers from repetitive stress injuries.



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