

Comair pilots strike against low wages at US regional airlines

Jim Lawrence, Jerry White
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The strike by 1,350 pilots against Comair, now in its second week, is threatening the US airline industry's longtime strategy of using smaller, regional carriers to undermine the wages and benefits of airline workers as a whole.

Comair, which was bought by Delta Air Lines in 1999, was the first regional airline to fly jets eight years ago. Previously the regional airlines used small turboprop planes, for flights of no more than a few hundred miles, and took advantage of young pilots who were willing to fly for lower wages in order to get the experience needed to join a major airline later.

Regional jets—RJs, for short—allowed Comair and other commuter airlines to carry more passengers twice as far, twice as fast, as the smaller propeller airplanes, increasing pretax profit margins to over 20 percent. Comair, the US's second largest regional carrier, which also operates under the name Delta Connection, now flies jets to 95 cities in the US, Canada, Mexico and the Bahamas. Its 53-gate concourse in Cincinnati, opened in 1994, is the largest regional airline facility in the world.

“The route map of Comair looks like a major airlines’,” said Duane Woerth, president of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), which represents the striking pilots. “Delta wants to keep this myth of the regional carrier, the farm club, going as long as it can. The idea of no work rules, no pension and half the pay just won't work anymore.”

According to an April 3 *USA Today* article, regional carriers today transport one in eight domestic airline passengers. In five years, regionals are expected to carry a third more passengers than they presently do. Most major airlines—American, Continental, Delta, Northwest, US Airways, Alaska, American Trans Air—now own or partly own their largest regional

carriers, locking in the passenger feeds and profits. According to the Regional Airline Association, there are 585 RJs flying today, and the General Accounting Office says 1,255 more are on order.

The major airlines and the big Wall Street investors behind them are backing Comair's hard line against the pilots and are determined to keep labor costs down at the regional airlines. Delta has continued to fly Comair passengers during the strike, keeping its losses to a minimum.

Delta is also worried that sharp pay increases at Comair will be demanded at Delta's other wholly owned regional carrier, Atlantic Southeast Airlines, whose pilots contract is up for renewal soon. At the same time Delta is worried about its own pilots, who may strike as early as April 29 if no contract is reached.

There is considerable anger among Comair pilots and other regional airline workers towards their union, ALPA, which has negotiated one contract after another with substandard pay and conditions.

A first-year Comair pilot earns top pay of \$16,000 a year, the 40-hour-week equivalent of \$7.50 an hour. The pilots are demanding wages comparable to what pilots earn at their parent company, Delta. They have turned down the company's offer to raise a Level 1 pilot's wages to \$20,900. The pilots are also demanding a reduction in co-payments for health insurance and better retirement benefits.

The Comair pilots are also demanding adequate rest periods—they are often on call 16 hours a day awaiting a flight assignment. Ron Sogum, a Comair pilot with 16 years who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the picket line in Cincinnati, said pilots are tired when they get into a cockpit without proper rest, putting them and their passengers at risk.

“For 10 years we have not had a contract that reflects

the work we do. Level 1 pilots earn a wage rate based on flying propeller-driven aircraft and regional routes, and today's pilots fly state-of-the-art jet aircraft,” Sogum said. “Our pay is so low that when we start drawing strike pay it will represent a wage increase. I think the strike will turn out okay. The president hasn't intervened in our strike, and we deserve a better contract.”

Other airline workers, as well as passengers at the Cincinnati airport, expressed their sympathy with the striking pilots. As cars and other vehicles passed the picket lines, several honked their horns in solidarity.

Elaine Ellis and Bechy Blessing, 18-year-old high school students from Indianapolis, Indiana, said, “We support the pilots because no one should have to work for such low wages. We place our lives in the pilots' hands on board the plane and our lives are worth more than \$16,000 a year.”

An airport parking attendant added, “I support the strike for more pay for pilots. I could use a \$3.00-an-hour wage increase myself. How are young people going to be encouraged to make something of themselves when pilots earn so little? You can make \$20,000 working food service.”

Dave Schick, a computer analyst, said, “I read the pilots' handout and I am all for them. I install information systems and as a contract worker I often work 16 hours, five days a week. With a base salary of \$50,000 and two children, I just get by. As a contract employee I fly somewhere almost every week. I try to rest on flights, but having read the pilots' handout about their working hours, I will keep my eyes open from now on.

“I think something has gone wrong when pilots can make a lot more money bombing people in the air force than taking care of people. Maybe things have always been wrong. One thing I do know: I can't go much longer working 16-hour days and not seeing my wife and kids.”

See Also:

US Air Line Pilots Association strikes Comair
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