

Bush blocks strike by United Airlines mechanics

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21 December 2001

President Bush intervened on Thursday to block a strike by United Airlines' 15,000 mechanics who have gone without a pay raise for seven years. Bush signed an executive order establishing a presidential emergency board and barring the workers from striking for at least another two months.

The mechanics, who are members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), were preparing to strike on Friday after a federally mandated cooling-off period imposed last month expired. A week ago the workers voted by a 99 percent margin to walk out. At the time, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said President George Bush would "look very unkindly" on strike action, claiming it would endanger the US airlines industry.

Given the anger of rank-and-file mechanics, Bush's preemptive strike-breaking even provoked protest from IAM officials who have a long record of close relations with the airline companies and government. "Airline employees everywhere are bitter," said IAM President Tom Buffenbarger. "The administration that wouldn't lift a finger to help their laid off co-workers is now leading the way to prevent the remaining workers from helping themselves. This abuse has gone far enough."

With the president publicly committed to block all strikes in the airline industry, management at the country's second largest airline has had little reason to come to terms on pay raises. IAM representatives have been negotiating over wages for two years with no result.

The Presidential Emergency Board has 30 days to come up with a suggested settlement, then the airline and union have 30 days to consider the proposal before they can resort to taking their own action. If an impasse still exists after 60 days, Congress will have the legal authority to pass legislation imposing a contract.

Announcing Bush's decision to block a strike, Fleischer said, "The president is concerned about the economy, particularly after September 11, and the effect that airline strikes would have on the economy, on the ability of the public to travel at this time."

Bush has repeatedly intervened to block airline-related strikes this year. He prevented a strike by Northwest Airline mechanics last March and his threat to intervene helped management push through settlements for Delta Air Lines pilots and flight attendants at AMR Corp.'s American Airlines.

These interventions have been aimed at bolstering the plans of airline executives to carry out a massive restructuring of the industry. The airlines are seeking to restore profitability through the destruction of tens of thousands of airline employees' jobs and an assault on their living standards and working conditions. This process is not only taking place in the US but internationally, with carriers such as Sabena, Ansett and Swissair going bankrupt and flagship carriers Qantas, British Airways and others freezing wages and slashing tens of thousands of jobs.

Most workers in the US airline industry have never recovered from the concessions their unions granted in the early 1990s—during the last recession—although the carriers made record profits and paid out huge amounts to their corporate executives and wealthy stockholders as the economy expanded later in the decade.

Even before September 11, Wall Street analysts were complaining of costly labor contracts and demanding that the airlines cut costs. The airlines then seized on the events of September 11 to implement downsizing and cost-cutting plans prepared well in advance and demand a multibillion-dollar bailout at taxpayer expense. United eliminated the jobs of 20,000 pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and ground crew workers

as part of the nearly 150,000 airline workers laid off throughout the industry.

The Bush administration's \$5 billion federal bailout for the industry—which included \$802 million for United alone—did nothing for the tens of thousands of airline workers losing their jobs. Laid-off workers who were anticipating at least a temporary extension of unemployment payments or health care benefits did not receive a penny.

Two months ago, in an effort to press for employee concessions, United's chief executive James Goodwin warned the airline may "perish sometime next year" because of falling air travel after September 11. Goodwin resigned shortly thereafter, taking a severance package of more than \$3.2 million in addition to his almost \$1 million salary.

On Thursday the company issued a statement saying it was opening its financial records to the unions in order to put together a "turnaround" plan. In a thinly veiled threat that more jobs would go unless the mechanics and other workers accepted concessions, the statement read: "Our hope is that a common understanding of the facts will lead to some common measures to preserve good jobs and return the company to profitability soon."

Earlier this week the pilots union at Delta accepted a plan that would allow the company to furlough hundreds of pilots while others would "volunteer" to fly at a 26 percent salary reduction.

The efforts of the union bureaucracy to accommodate itself to the demands of big business and collaborate with management are epitomized by the situation at United, a so-called "employee-owned" company where officials from the machinists' and pilots' unions sit on the company board of directors.

Bush's action against the United mechanics follows shortly after the arrest of more than 200 teachers in New Jersey and the breaking of their strike. It further underscores the fact that at the same time the US government is waging war on behalf of corporate America in Central Asia it is not letting up on the class war against working people at home.



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