

US Airways workers stage Christmas job action

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US Airways was forced to cancel hundreds of flights over the long Christmas weekend. An unusually high numbers of baggage handlers and ramp workers in Philadelphia and flight attendants in other cities called in sick in an apparent job action against wage-cutting and other concessions being demanded by the nation's sixth largest airline.

The airline, which filed for its second bankruptcy in two years in September, is demanding massive pay and benefit cuts from workers, who have already gone through two rounds of givebacks. In October a bankruptcy court ordered all union employees at the airline to accept a 21 percent "emergency" pay cut after the company claimed it would go out of business early next year without massive concessions.

In ongoing court hearings in Alexandria, Virginia, the company is asking US Bankruptcy Judge Stephen Mitchell to abrogate the contracts of any union that does not accept concessions, in order to realize \$950 million in cost savings. It has also asked the judge to allow it to terminate pension obligations for 53,000 current and former employees. The judge's ruling is expected in early January.

On Christmas Eve the airline was forced to cancel 176 flights out of about 1,200 flights system-wide. On Christmas Day there were 143 cancellations and on Sunday, December 26, another 43 flights were cancelled.

It is likely the job action was launched by rank-and-file workers without the authority of their unions, which have blocked any action to defend the workers' livelihoods. A spokesman for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, which represents US Airways baggage handlers, disassociated the union from any job action, saying the IAM had nothing to do with it. A representative of the

Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) did the same.

Expecting some sort of job action this holiday weekend—flight attendants had carried out a similar "sickout" during Christmas 2001—the president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the AFA sent an email to union members on December 23 urging them to volunteer to come into work on their days off, despite any ill feelings they may have over contract proposals. "This is tough right now," Teddy Xidas wrote. "Sick calls are in the hundreds, and if we lose money and cancel flights, it won't matter what we ratify. There won't be anything left to salvage."

The struggle by US Airways workers is being followed closely by all airline workers. With a further downturn in the industry anticipated for 2005, the six biggest airlines—American, United, Delta, Continental, Northwest and US Airways—are expected to seek another \$7.5 billion in spending cuts and eliminate at least 20,000 jobs next year.

Under pressure from workers at US Airways and other carriers seeking similar cutbacks, the leadership of the 46,000-member flight attendants' union last month threatened to strike US Airways and other AFA-organized carriers, including United Airlines, if the bankruptcy court cancelled US Airways' labor contract and unilaterally imposed wage and benefit cuts. At the time Pat Friend, the international president of the AFA, declared, "Enough is enough. We will not stand by while our employers destroy our careers in a desperate attempt to cover for their own mistakes."

The proposed strike action was overwhelmingly approved by flight attendants at US Airways, United Airlines as well as several other carriers organized by other unions, including American and Southwest. On December 15, however, the AFA dropped its strike threat and accepted a 9 percent pay cut and reductions

in benefits and vacation time. The same day the airlines told flight attendants based in Boston, Charlotte, New York and Washington that they would have to fly an additional five hours a month starting in February to make up for labor shortages.

Last weekend's job action began the same day US Airways reservations and gate agents approved a new contract, recommended by the Communications Workers of America, that cuts pay by 13 percent and opens the way for the elimination of hundreds of jobs. The Air Line Pilots Association and three labor groups represented by the Transportation Workers Union have already agreed to more than \$325 million a year in wage and benefit cuts. The International Association of Machinists, representing baggage handlers and mechanics, is the last holdout. The votes of airline workers on the givebacks will be counted by January 5.

The union bureaucracy has won praise from top US Airways executives for being "responsible" and "taking the hard decisions" to impose concessions on their members. No kind words, however, were reserved for the airline workers fighting to defend their jobs and living standards.

US Airways CEO Bruce Lakefield denounced the "irresponsible actions of a few," adding, "I have seen lots of excuses for why people took it upon themselves to call in sick, such as low morale, poor management, anger over pay cuts and frustration with labor negotiations. None of those excuses passes the test."

The comments by Lakefield—who has not taken any cut in his multimillion-dollar compensation package, which includes a \$425,000 annual salary, 760,000 shares of stock and a severance agreement that provides him the equivalent of three years' base salary and bonuses if the company is sold and he loses his job—were met with derision by US Airways workers. A maintenance worker in Philadelphia told the *New York Times*, "I don't blame any employee who wants to spend the holiday with their family after what they have been put through this year. The extra presents under the tree that my kids didn't get this year. I'll tell [Lakefield] thank you for that."



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