Pilots, machinists, flight attendants unions cross picket lines

Striking Northwest Airlines mechanics face union-busting assault

A WSWS reporting team
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Northwest Airlines, the fourth largest US carrier, launched a massive strikebreaking operation against its mechanics and airplane cleaners, members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Organization (AMFA), who struck at 12:01 a.m. Saturday.

The 4,400 workers walked out after rejecting management demands for a 26 percent pay cut, the elimination of more than half of their jobs, higher payments for health insurance and cuts in sick pay. The airline is also demanding a freeze on pensions and the transformation of the plan into a 401(k)-type "defined contribution" plan, which would entail sharp cuts in retirement benefits and make them subject to the vagaries of the stock exchange.

Northwest was able to continue flying despite the strike because of the refusal of the other unions at the airline to support the mechanics. The Air Line Pilots Association and the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which are members of the AFL-CIO union federation, are crossing the mechanics' picket lines and continuing to work, as are the flight attendants, organized in the independent Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA).

The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association is, like the PFAA, not affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Six years ago, the Northwest mechanics, who were then members of the IAM along with baggage handlers and other ground employees, left the IAM and formed their own unit of AMFA. Now the IAM has reportedly agreed to allow some of its members to perform tasks normally done by striking airplane cleaners who are members of AMFA.

Northwest made it clear it would declare a lockout if the mechanics union decided not to strike when a 30-day "cooling-off" period expired at midnight Friday. The company had boasted of having prepared for the past 18 months to launch a strikebreaking operation and had spent over $100 million to hire and house "replacement" mechanics and flight attendants. The airline lined up 1,200 nonunion mechanics, plus 400 vendor workers and 300 managers for a total strikebreaking force of 1,900.

Northwest also threatened to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and follow its rivals, United Airlines and US Airways, in using the bankruptcy courts to terminate its employees' pension plans and impose sweeping concessions and job cuts.

Picketing mechanics told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the final Northwest offer contained even deeper cuts than its earlier proposals, underscoring the intention of the company to force the workers out on strike.

Over the past several years, Northwest has eliminated the jobs of thousands of mechanics. As a consequence, the average mechanic at Northwest is age 50, with 18 years seniority.

Northwest claims it needs $1.1 billion in annual cost savings from its four unions to avert bankruptcy. It is demanding $176 million in concessions from the mechanics union.

For its part, the AMFA offered to accept $100 million worth of concessions, including a 16 percent wage cut, but Northwest flatly rejected the proposal.

The Bush administration, entirely in line with Northwest's wishes, declared earlier this week that it would not intervene to halt a strike or lockout. Had it appeared that the strike would either halt or drastically curtail the airline's operations, there is little doubt the White House would have stepped in on the side of the company.

The united front of government and corporations against the mechanics—and airline workers in general—was once again shown by a federal court ruling Friday enjoining AMFA mechanics at Northwest's regional carrier Mesaba Airlines from striking in support of the Northwest mechanics.

The isolation of the mechanics is the latest demonstration of the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy and the failure of the official labor movement in the United States, which has abandoned the most elementary principles of working class solidarity.

The leadership of the Professional Flight Attendants Union claims to support the mechanics, but announced it would not order its members to honor the mechanics' picket lines, citing the negative results of a poll of its membership, who took a strike vote last week. The PFAA officials are keeping the strike vote totals secret. Flight attendants are themselves facing huge demands for concessions by Northwest, including a 20 percent pay cut, increased outsourcing and major changes in work

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rules.

AMFA itself has no viable perspective for defending its members. Jim Young, an AMFA spokesman, declared that the union would rather force the company into bankruptcy than agree to its demands for massive layoffs. The AMFA leadership is promoting the illusion that the workers can somehow defend their jobs, wages and conditions under the auspices of a bankruptcy judge.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to strikers at Northwest hubs in Minneapolis and Detroit. Keith, a mechanic for 20 years with Northwest in Detroit, told the WSWS:

"We feel that they want to file bankruptcy before the bankruptcy laws change October 17 so they get the government to pick up their pension like United did. We hear they have lawyers ready to file for bankruptcy if this fails.

"When 9/11 happened we had 9,200 mechanics. Now we're down to just over 4,000 and they want to slash that in half.

"My whole airline career, at least one half to two thirds of the time, I have been working under a pay cut. This airline could shut down tomorrow and the CEOs would still have their millions. This company changes CEOs so often. They leave with millions and we are still here, doing the work. We feel that as soon as they can get rid of us, they will. I've just about had enough." .

A cleaner with 16 years seniority told the WSWS, "I don't think that unskilled labor can do this. I don't think their contingency plan provides safety for the traveling public. These people out here gave their sweat and blood. Rain, sleet or snow, we were there for them. Northwest is a company that would suck blood out of a turnip."

One veteran inspector with 21 years at Northwest in Minneapolis told the WSWS: "Right now, we are exactly where Northwest wants us. They've made that patently clear through the whole negotiating process. As the company said, they've been planning this for 18 months.

"Just as the airlines merge together, I think there should be a coming together of the unions, if, for nothing else, but to communicate. Otherwise the whole game is lost."

A maintenance worker at the Minneapolis hub with 26 years seniority said, "The bottom line is Northwest wants all our money. We used to have over 9,000 members in our union. That's down below 5,000 and they want to halve that. Now everybody out here on the picket line has over 20-plus years.

"It seems to be that no matter how much you give them it's never enough. This goes back to 1993 to 1996 when we gave up but never got that money back. And it seems like no matter what you gain, they want to push you back down.

"I suppose the air traffic controllers' strike was the start of the plan to destroy unions. And it doesn't look good because of globalization. Business wants free trade, things like NAFTA, but if an older person wants to save a little money and buy drugs from Canada, they can't do that.

"A perfect example of what we need is the way workers at British Airways stuck together last week. The food people, who really have nothing to do with the operating of the airline, got fired. When that happened the baggage handlers, who are in the same union, walked out on strike.

"Here at Northwest, all the different groups of employees I know seem really supportive. But as far as what to do, they seem unsure and the leadership isn't leading. But we're not going to give up and hopefully we'll win this fight."

Mike Joyce, a line mechanic with 19 years at Northwest who was picketing at the McNamara Terminal at Detroit Metro Airport, said:

"We've known for the last two years that the company wanted to force us out on strike. Management made up its mind this was the course it wanted to take.

"We understand that the company has financial problems and needs assistance. We're willing to negotiate, if they are reasonable. But this contract would eliminate over 50 percent of our jobs. Plus it would impose a 26 percent wage cut, force us to pay more for medical benefits, give up vacation time, and take a cut in sick pay. How could we possibly accept that?

"I have no doubt they will file for bankruptcy. They forced us out so they could blame bankruptcy on us. They want to outsource virtually their entire maintenance operation.

"The biggest danger here is a plane crash. I've been here for almost 20 years, and I know you can't just come in here, even if you're an experienced mechanic, and work on these airplanes. We know them like the backs of our hands.

"The state of the American labor movement is sad right now. It's been in decline for years. The government is contributing to union-busting in the US.

"A political party of the working people is long overdue. This country needs a strong party that represents workers' desires and needs. The Democratic Party has not represented us. They haven't shown me that they're working for American workers. In a lot of senses, they're the same as the Republicans."

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