

# Northwest Airlines gloats over union-busting against striking mechanics

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Three days into a strike by mechanics at Northwest Airlines, executives have begun to gloat over the ability of the company to continue operations.

No new negotiations have been scheduled with the union, the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Organization (AMFA), which represents both mechanics and aircraft cleaners. The position of the company is that it will be able to operate normally without the 4,400 workers on strike. Northwest has begun to implement a plan according to which much of the work carried out by the strikers will be contracted out to other companies at much less cost.

Doug Steenland, the company's president and CEO, told the *Detroit News* on Sunday, "Our statistics show we are humming along and operating reliable and dependable and getting out people there on time and on schedule." On Saturday, he praised the strike plan that the company devised over the course of 18 months, calling it "the most detailed and comprehensive that has ever been put in place under a circumstance like this."

Steenland has said that some of the mechanics will be given their jobs back if they cross their own picket lines; however they would have to accept conditions worse than any deal the company has already offered. It is likely that most of the company's 800 aircraft cleaners will never be allowed to return to the company, as they have already been replaced by contract workers.

The media has generally applauded the ability of the airline to continue operations, and Wall Street has also indicated its approval. In spite of the strike, stock analysts have listed the company as a "buy," and on Monday the company's share value was up 28 cents, or 5.20 percent.

Nevertheless, there have been reports of higher than normal flight delays and cancellations. Representatives for the union said that the airline will begin to suffer in terms of safety and reliability as the strike wears on.

Northwest owes whatever "success" it has achieved

largely to the betrayal carried out by the trade union bureaucracy. The airline has been able to continue its operations only because of decisions by the Air Line Pilots Association and the International Association of Machinists, both member unions of the AFL-CIO, to cross picket lines. The Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA), which like the AMFA is an independent union, has also decided to continue work.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of workers picketing outside the Northwest hub in Detroit on Monday morning. Most of the workers have been working at the company for over 20 years, and now face the imminent loss of their jobs.

Jeff Etterman, an aircraft cleaner for 21 years, expressed anger that the IAM had decided to cross the picket lines. He noted that some IAM workers had been instructed to perform tasks normally done by the striking workers. He said, however, that the IAM workers "did not want to do it" but were being forced to by the company and the decisions of the IAM leadership.

"There was no vote in the IAM on the strike," he said. "I think it involves a personal vendetta between the leadership of the IAM and the leadership of the AMFA." The AMFA split from the IAM in 1999.

Bruce Cawetzka, an aircraft cleaner at Northwest for 28 years, said that many of the workers at the airlines were sympathetic to the strikers, but felt unable to do anything. "If the workers were to honor our lines," he said, "they would lose their positions. They have families to support, kids to put through college. I don't blame them." Earlier in the month, Northwest sent out emails to workers in the PFAA, explicitly warning them that they would lose their jobs if they did not continue working.

"They went after the AMFA on purpose," Bruce said, in order to break the union and get rid of the workers. "This will set a major precedent, and not just at the airlines." He pointed to the threat of bankruptcy at the auto giant

General Motors, and said that “all the companies are attacking their workers.”

Jeff added that the airlines are not worrying because the government is backing them. “These guys have nothing to lose. They know they have backup.” If the company does not succeed in forcing through cuts that it considers sufficient, it has threatened to file for bankruptcy and have those cuts implemented by the courts. “There has been no response from the Democrats either,” Jeff added. “[Michigan Governor Jennifer] Granholm is a Democrat. So are [Michigan Senators Debbie] Stabenow and [Carl] Levin. They haven’t said anything. I emailed Levin about this and he said he would think about it.”

Dan Herzog, a mechanic for 16 years at Northwest, commented on the decline in safety conditions at the airline, before and during the strike. “Safety has been really going downhill” over the past several years, he said, as the company tries to cut costs. “They went to the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] to have the regulations changed. For example, they used to have to do a line check [a full check of the airplane] every 72 hours, but they got that stretched out to once a week.”

Opposing claims by the company to have replaced the workers with well-trained mechanics, Dan noted that he watched as a team of mechanics took four or five hours to change a tire that should have taken only 30 minutes. There have been several reports of plane malfunctions, including burst tires. A couple of planes have been forced to abandon departure after smoke appeared in the cockpit.

Dan said that the ultimate aim of the company was not simply money. “They want to get rid of us. They want to outsource everything. The entire country is like this,” he said.

Tammy and Dave, both cleaners at the airline, spoke animatedly about the enormous problems they are facing. “We are losing our lives,” Tammy said. “People will lose their homes. Their kids can’t go to college. What are we supposed to do? There are no jobs in the state of Michigan. It has the second highest unemployment rate in the country. We won’t have health insurance. COBRA [which allows employees to continue company health coverage after being terminated] is too expensive, it costs \$1,400 a month. No one can afford it.”

Dave said that they were in a “horrible situation.” Workers “have given 20 years of our lives to this company and have now been reduced to being replaced by scab workers. This is about corporate greed,” he said, noting that Northwest executives were making millions of dollars.

John, a mechanic for 21 years, pointed to some of the close ties between the company and the Bush administration. Elaine Chao, the current secretary of labor, was once on the board of directors of Northwest Airlines.

John drew a connection between the situation confronting the workers at Northwest and broader issues, including the war in Iraq. “Bush went over there to steal the oil in Iraq. There were never any weapons of mass destruction or anything like that,” he said. “They want all the power, in Iraq and in the US. Bush is ruining the economy. Soon nobody is going to have any money except the rich people.”

On Sunday, a WSWWS team spoke to a number of workers at the Northwest Airlines hub in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A mechanic for 18 years said, “Throughout the strike and the past decade, the union leadership has been poor. If you take your cue from foreign countries, when one union goes on strike, they all do. But not here. And I don’t believe they have the problem in other countries of upper management people getting millions and millions as opposed to what the people on the floor are getting. There’s more parity.

“We’ve got to get all workers to start supporting each other, but I wonder if it’s attainable. Corporations are picking us off one by one. And the courts are a joke. Courts do whatever corporations tell them to do. Before this strike even started, [Northwest regional affiliate] Mesaba mechanics had an injunction placed against them to prohibit them from supporting our strike.

“Politicians are the same way. They’re the ones who write the laws that allow the corporations to do these things. What I’d like to see is the whole country shut down for a week. Not just union workers, but nonunion workers too, because their suffering the same way we are. We need to put a stop to this.”



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