

Northwest mechanics rally in Minnesota

Our reporter
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Hundreds of striking airline mechanics, their families and supporters held a noon rally Saturday, August 27 near the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport to show their determination to fight against the union-busting attack by Northwest Airlines management. But no serious perspective was advanced by some twenty speakers—a majority of whom were Democrats seeking local, state and national office—to advance the interests of the striking mechanics or the working class as a whole. Instead, a hodge-podge of myths and fictions were promulgated to sow illusions among the strikers.

After much empty rhetoric about solidarity, most Democrats were reduced to making an appeal to Northwest to return to the bargaining table. Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, in his remarks, tried to mask capitalist reality by saying that Northwest Airlines not only belonged to corporate executives and wealthy stockholders, but it “also belongs to the people who get their hands dirty.” Many speakers emphasized that Northwest would ultimately be unable to successfully replace strikers.

Among the crowd could be seen banners and signs indicating the presence of workers from the Teamsters, International Association of Machinists (IAM), United Auto Workers, Service Employees International Union, building trades and other organizations. But not a single national union leader or top Minnesota AFL-CIO official addressed the crowd with the exception of David Foster, District 11 director for the United Steelworkers.

Foster’s speech, however, was the most nationalistic and corporatist of the group. As an example of what might be accomplished, Foster spoke about the punishing 20-month lockout by Kaiser Steel of 2,900 workers. He declared that Kaiser had been a company with a “patriotic history” that included manufacturing ships that helped “defeat the Japanese and Germans” in World War II. He denounced the corporate leadership that launched the lockout and glorified the new corporate leadership that was brought on board when a contract was finally ratified in February of 2004. He specifically noted the \$175

million claim that was won against Kaiser under an Unfair Labor Practices suit.

What Foster neglected to mention to the rally was that 20,000 Kaiser hourly and salaried retirees lost all or most of their pensions, an amount estimated between \$800 million and \$1.1 billion. What probably delighted Foster most about the deal was that the Steelworkers’ bureaucracy negotiated the right to appoint four members to Kaiser’s ten-member board of directors. Foster concluded his speech by saying companies that choose to work with unions will win and those that don’t, “those companies will fail.”

Kip Hedges, a Northwest baggage handler and former president of the IAM at the Twin Cities airport, called the strike by the mechanics “the battle of Gettysburg.” Hedges, along with some 50 other IAM members at Northwest have exercised their right under article 26 of their contract to honor the mechanics’ picket lines. Hedges appealed to mechanics and baggage handlers to set aside past differences over the decision of mechanics to split from the IAM and switch to the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). He called on workers to join AMFA’s picket lines and for AMFA to support sympathy strikers. He also said workers should picket the houses of Northwest executives. “These are the nails that we are going to put in the coffin of union-busting.”

Guy Meek, president of the independent Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA) that represents 10,000 Northwest attendants, reported that flight attendants have come under harassment by Northwest management for issuing too many safety write-ups. Meek pointed out that mechanics aren’t the only ones facing outsourcing. “Northwest is taking the vast majority of our jobs and giving them to foreign nationals.”

Meek was followed by rank-and-file flight attendant Peggy Lubinski. Last Monday, Lubinski called in to Northwest and told them she wouldn’t cross AMFA’s picket lines. Northwest retaliated by firing her. She told the rally, “I’m asking the flight attendants not to cross the

picket line...the PFAA can't say that." She reported that Northwest has been preparing several thousand flight attendants from the Asian-Pacific region to take their jobs. "You guys need to walk ... they're going to do to you exactly what they're doing to AMFA."

The meeting concluded with a speech from AMFA Local 33 president Ted Ludwig. He called on Northwest workers to honor AMFA's picket lines and said to strikers they would win "as long as we don't cross our own picket lines."

Since the Reagan administration's destruction of the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981, all attempts to base struggles against union-busting on various trade union tactics similar to those called for at the AMFA rally have met with defeat, as have attempts to place confidence in the courts, NLRB or the Democratic Party.

Towards the beginning of Ludwig's remarks, he quoted from Farrell Dobbs' writings on the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters truck driver strike. "The tinder of discontent begins to pile up. Any spark can light it, and once lit, the fire can spread rapidly."

Ludwig grossly distorted this history by describing Dobbs merely as a leader of the Teamsters. But Dobbs and other leaders of the 1934 Teamster strike were not simply trade unionists, although they took responsibility for leading powerful working-class struggles.

They were revolutionary socialists, followers of Leon Trotsky, who went on to found the Socialist Workers Party and support the founding of the Fourth International, the international party which is today represented by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Their activities as trade unionists were guided by a perspective of establishing the political independence of the working class, in the United States and throughout the world, from all forms of capitalist political domination in the struggle for a workers government and socialism.



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