

Machinists union grabs jobs of striking Northwest mechanics

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Six days into the strike by mechanics and cleaners at Northwest Airlines, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) has stepped up its collaboration with the company's strikebreaking operation. On Thursday, Northwest announced that the jobs of some of the striking workers, who belong to the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), will be taken over by members of the IAM, which represents baggage handlers and other ground employees at the airline.

The jobs being transferred include filling planes with drinking water and emptying lavatory holding tanks. From the first day of the strike the IAM began performing tasks normally performed by AMFA members, such as cleaning planes, guiding planes on the ground, changing the oil, and making repairs to aviation equipment.

The move to shift more of the work to the IAM came after the union itself pressured the company to transfer the jobs. According to Thursday's *Detroit Free Press*, "Northwest told the International Association of Machinists it could take over those tasks after union officials warned their continued cooperation depended on it... De Pace said the machinists want to keep the work even if AMFA and Northwest settle their dispute."

The IAM, with the backing of the AFL-CIO federation to which it belongs, is not only helping Northwest operate with some 1,200 newly hired strikebreakers, it is seeking to directly profit from the busting of the mechanics' union by grabbing the strikers' jobs. Such is the depths of political and moral depravity to which the American trade union bureaucracy has sunk!

The AMFA strikers have been thoroughly isolated by the rest of the unions at Northwest. In addition to IAM's scabbing, the Air Line Pilots Association (an

AFL-CIO affiliate) and the independent Professional Flight Attendants Association are crossing the mechanics' picket lines.

AMFA, an independent craft-based union not affiliated with the AFL-CIO, was brought into Northwest six years ago when the airline's mechanics, then part of the IAM along with the other ground workers, left the IAM and joined AMFA.

Robert Roach, the IAM general vice president, said his union "would not be duped into standing with AMFA." Stewart Acuff, national organizing director of the AFL-CIO, dismissed the strikebreaking at Northwest by saying, "I don't think this situation says anything about the rest of the labor movement."

According to an article in Thursday's *Wall Street Journal*, Northwest said it was "prepared to operate indefinitely with its contingent work force of mechanics." Much of the aircraft cleaning has already been farmed out to contractors at far reduced wages.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Website* spoke to workers on the picket line at the Northwest hub in Detroit, discussing the issues raised in the statement of the WSWs Editorial Board entitled "The Northwest strike: the end of the AFL-CIO and the political lessons for the working class").

All of the workers expressed anger and disappointment at the decision by the IAM to scab on their strike. Mike, a mechanic for 23 years, compared the current strike to that of Continental Airlines in the 1980s. "They took the mechanics out first. None of the other unions supported it. They started to hire new people. Then they went after the pilots. And so on. Each time, we wanted to walk together, but it never happened."

Barry, a mechanic for over 19 years, expressed skepticism that any of the workers would get their jobs

back. “Instead of bringing us in,” he said, “they will bring additional contract workers in. They don’t want AMFA back. They don’t want any unions. All these unions should be ashamed.”

Standing beside him, Sidney, a mechanic for 10 years, added, “They are next in line,” referring to concessions that the company is demanding from flight attendants and IAM ground workers.

Tonya, a cleaner for 16 years, said of the IAM, “It almost makes you feel like they are just as bad as the scabs. De Pace told them to cross and they are honoring that. They want to support us, but they are doing what their union wants them to do. It should be us against the company, not against each other.”

Many of the workers said Northwest’s safety was being seriously compromised due to the use of strikebreakers. Barry estimated that only about 30 percent of the replacements had experience repairing the type of planes used by Northwest.

Mike said, “We’re not getting fair coverage in the media. According to them, everything is hunky dory. Well, it’s not. The workers they have now can fix the reading light and change the oil or other small things, but the bigger things like repairing the auto pilot or an engine problem, they can’t. Sometimes you have to read between the lines of the manual, because it’s not all there. There are a lot of things you learn over the years through experience, which these new people don’t have.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to the president of AMFA Local 5, Bob Rose. He said, “They can’t keep the airlines in the air. They are jeopardizing the safety of the airlines for the bottom line. We are hurting them.” When asked about his overall strategy for defeating the airline, he merely held out the hope that the strike would eventually succeed.

Many of the picketing workers expressed disgust and disillusionment with the Democratic Party. Mike said the two main parties act as “one party.”

When asked about the Democratic Party, Tonya said, “I haven’t seen anyone out here. I haven’t seen any of them on the news. When it is time to vote, they expect us to go out and vote for them. However, when it comes to a strike, they are not there. That says it all. Maybe the Democratic Party is the Republican Party in

disguise.”



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