

Northwest Airlines union submits plan to cut 89 percent of members' jobs for rank-and-file vote

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In the latest demonstration of the prostration of the unions before the US corporate wage- and job-cutting offensive, the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), on strike against Northwest Airlines since August 20, announced Friday it was submitting the company's latest contract offer for a membership vote. Under the "offer," only some 500 of the 4,400 AMFA members at the airline would return to work. The rest of the union workers would receive a mere four weeks of severance pay.

More than 500 strikebreakers hired by Northwest to scab on the AMFA workers and subsequently given permanent jobs would retain their positions, minus any protection against layoffs or traditional seniority rights. These workers would not be obliged to join the union or pay union dues.

The membership ratification process is slated to last two weeks.

AMFA officials did not reveal the pay cut included in the company package, but prior to the strike the company was demanding a cut of 25 percent for the AMFA mechanics and airplane cleaners. Since the strike, Northwest has repeatedly upped its concession demands, relying on 1,200 strikebreakers and scabbing by the other unions at the airline to isolate the mechanics and eviscerate their strike. Northwest has been able to keep flying throughout the walkout.

The pre-strike contract that was rejected by AMFA called for the elimination of 1,650 union jobs and provided up to 26 weeks of severance pay. In the intervening period the airline filed for bankruptcy court protection, and last week filed papers in US Bankruptcy Court in New York asking the judge to void existing labor contracts for all of its unions, with the exception

of AMFA, if they refuse in the coming weeks to agree to an additional \$900 million in annual givebacks.

In a message to the strikers on Friday, the AMFA leadership felt obliged to say, "This is not a sellout by AMFA or your negotiating committee." The message went on to say of the company proposal: "When you look at the details, you will be hard pressed to find anything 'good.'"

Northwest issued a statement declaring, "We are pleased that the AMFA leadership is giving employees the opportunity to vote on the proposed terms of an agreement."

In all, Northwest, the fourth largest US airline, is demanding \$1.4 billion in annual cost reductions from its unions. The \$1.4 billion figure is up from Northwest's earlier target of \$1.1 billion. The breakdown among the separate bargaining units is: \$611.8 million in cuts for pilots, including a 28.5 percent pay cut and the loss of 890 jobs; \$195 million for flight attendants, who will suffer a 17.5 percent pay cut and the loss of 2,644 jobs; and \$190 million for ground workers and customer service agents, where pay cuts will average between 5 percent and 12 percent.

Nonunion workers will also feel the knife in the new round of cuts. Northwest will implement a \$36 million cut in benefits and salaries for 3,000 management employees starting December 1. This comes on top of a \$35 million cut from last year. Merit pay raises of 2.5 percent that were to be given out October 1 were eliminated. The company is also planning a 5 percent cut that it promises to restore once the airline emerges from bankruptcy.

Some \$80 million in medical costs for retirees is being targeted, with current retirees under age 65

expected to pay half the cost of benefits while coverage for pilots over 65 is eliminated.

The AMFA strike has from the outset exemplified the bankruptcy of the official labor movement in the US. From day one, the Air Line Pilots Association, which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, as well as the AFL-CIO-affiliated IAM (International Association of Machinists, which represents the ground workers), scabbed on the striking mechanics.

Officials from both unions as well as the national AFL-CIO denounced AMFA as a rogue union, because in 1999 the Northwest mechanics and cleaners, who then belonged to the IAM, left that union to form their own unit of AMFA, an independent craft union unaffiliated with the AFL-CIO federation.

The Teamsters, which along with the Service Employees International Union had split from the AFL-CIO the previous month to form the “Change to Win” coalition, refused to halt deliveries to the strikebreaking airline.

The Professional Flight Attendants Association, like AMFA an independent union, also refused to honor the mechanics’ picket lines. (The PFAA became the bargaining unit for the Northwest attendants in 2003, replacing the Teamsters).

The result of the back-stabbing by all factions of the official labor movement, combined with the lack of any perspective on the part of AMFA for defending the mechanics, is a catastrophe for every section of Northwest workers. The prostration and treachery of the union officialdom were aptly summed up by Bobby De Pace, district president of the IAM at Northwest, who responded to the airline’s talk of liquidating its operations if the unions fail to meet its concessions demands by telling the *Detroit Free Press*, “I would say there is some truth to that. They do need money. I just hope we can come to a consensual agreement...”

In the midst of this disaster for the workers, the spectacle of inter-union cannibalism continues apace. The IAM has been performing some of the work normally done by AMFA members and signing up replacement workers as IAM members.

Two AFL-CIO affiliates, the Transport Workers Union and the Association of Flight Attendants, have launched drives to oust the Professional Flight Attendants Association and capture the collective bargaining franchise for the airline’s 9,700 flight

attendants. At the same time, former Northwest flight attendants who served in the Teamsters bureaucracy are working to bring the Teamsters back in.



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