

Unions for flight attendants, pilots agree to huge concessions at Northwest Airlines

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The union representing 5,000 pilots at Northwest Airlines, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), reached a tentative agreement with the airline Friday morning, the day after a federal bankruptcy court postponed its ruling on the company's request to throw out its labor agreement and impose lower wages and benefits on the pilots.

Earlier in the week, negotiators for the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA), which represents 8,500 workers, reached a tentative agreement with the airline.

The agreements, which will allow the airline to slash jobs and sharply reduce labor costs, were reached by union officials as the anger of rank-and-file workers was rising, along with support for a strike against the concessions demands. Pilots voted by a 92 percent margin for a walkout, while flight attendants were still being polled when the PFAA reached the agreement.

US Bankruptcy Judge Allan Gropper twice extended the deadline on nullifying the labor agreements in order to give the union bureaucracy time to accept the airline's demands.

Announcing the deal, Captain Mark McClain, chairman of ALPA's Northwest Airlines unit, said, "The tentative agreement is a painful but necessary part of a successful restructuring of Northwest Airlines. If all of us can distance ourselves from these recent labor struggles and focus on ensuring the future success of Northwest we can begin looking forward to our emergence from bankruptcy as a proud and profitable airline."

Union officials have refused to release details about the number of jobs that will be cut and what pay and benefit reductions pilots and flight attendants will be forced to accept. The tentative agreements will be brought before the workers for a vote.

The enormous setback for pilots and flight attendants is the outcome of the treachery of the ALPA, PFAA and International Association of Machinists (IAM), all of which scabbed on the strike by 4,400 airline mechanics and cleaners who walked out last August 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.

Northwest was able to continue flying because the three other unions ordered their members to cross the picket lines of the striking workers, members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). While the company employed strikebreakers to smash the walkout and permanently replace the strikers, the IAM, which had been voted out by the mechanics six years earlier, negotiated with Northwest to take over the jobs of some of the striking workers.

Northwest, the fourth largest airline in the US, declared bankruptcy last September and has told the court it needs \$1.4 billion in labor cost reductions from its 32,000 workers to compete in the industry. It was seeking \$361 million in annual cuts from its pilots, after negotiating a \$250 million takeaway deal in 2004 that included a 15 percent pay cut. Last November, pilots took a temporary 24 percent wage cut to postpone a court hearing to void their contract.

The company has insisted on its right to start a new subsidiary or hire an outside firm to fly planes that seat 70-100 passengers, a move that would destroy the jobs of hundreds of pilots. There are already 700 pilots on furlough at the airline. Pilots have sought job protection guarantees in case of a merger or buyout of the company.

Northwest, which under-funded its pension plan by \$3.8 billion, replaced its defined-benefit plan with a

401 (K)-type plan, which is funded through deductions from pilots' pay. The two sides were negotiating how much the airline would contribute to the plan and if the contribution would begin before or after the company emerged from bankruptcy.

The ALPA leadership was also pushing for pilots to be granted a greater share of the company's stock, claiming that this would give workers greater control over corporate decisions. In 1994, ALPA gained positions on the board of directors of United Airlines after 83,000 employees gave up \$4.8 billion in wage concessions. In the years that followed, "employee-owned" United declared bankruptcy, slashed tens of thousands of jobs and imposed further takeaways on its workers.

The leadership of the PFAA claimed the agreement gave flight attendants job security in the event of a merger and protection against the outsourcing of jobs. While not providing any details of the so-called job protection guarantees, union president Guy Meek admitted these were gained only by accepting massive sacrifices. "It's not too easy to get to \$195 million," Meek said, referring to the target for flight attendant labor cost reductions Northwest was seeking. "So 2006 is going to be a real ugly year."

The airline has been demanding the use of lower-wage flight attendants from other countries, including China and India, on its international flights, a move that could reduce the number of US-based flight attendants by half. In response, the PFAA launched a chauvinist campaign with the support of various Democratic and Republican politicians, denouncing Northwest for its use of "foreign nationals" against US citizens who, they said, played an essential role in the struggle against terrorism.

This foul campaign, which can only drive a wedge between US airline workers and their counterparts in Asia, Europe and elsewhere who are facing similar attacks, will, in the end, do nothing to defend the jobs of flight attendants in the US. The PFAA was reportedly seeking a deal that would give Northwest flight attendants with foreign language skills the right to be considered for higher-paying international assignments over attendants with more seniority, but no foreign language skills. At best, this might save several hundred of the more than 4,000 jobs the company is seeking to eliminate through outsourcing.

Before the agreement with the PFAA was reached, a flight attendant with 28 years seniority told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We are upset that it has gotten this far. There is plenty of evidence that Northwest does not want to bargain in good faith. The union has offered lots of money in concessions and management still wants to take away the SCOPE clause that protects us against the outsourcing of our jobs. Under the clause if they were to sell off their Pacific division or some other division they would have to assure the jobs and conditions of our many of our flight attendants.

"In 1993 when we gave up so many concessions, including a 23 percent pay cut, we got the SCOPE clause in our contract. They promised to return the concessions we granted once the airline got back on its feet. They reneged on that and now they want to take away SCOPE too.

"This was the best job protection clause in the industry. Any type of flying had to be done with our flight attendants. Now they want to replace us with foreign nationals and pay them next to nothing and no benefits. The companies want to bring in flight attendants from China and use them as cheap labor.

"Flight attendants and all airline workers have taken a major cut in pay down through the years. Several people I know have been forced to file for bankruptcy to keep from losing their homes. That shouldn't be happening when you work for a multi-billion dollar global company.

"The Bush administration is encouraging this outsourcing for cheaper labor. It's all about corporate greed and CEOs who don't care about taking down 20 or 30,000 workers as long as they get their golden parachutes. They're getting millions while the ones who built this company are being tossed on the unemployment lines."



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