

Machinists union reaches tentative agreement with Northwest Airlines

Ron Jorgenson
25 May 2006

The leadership of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), representing 5,600 ramp workers and baggage handlers at Northwest Airlines, said over the weekend it will support a \$190 million concessionary agreement to help bail out the bankrupt airline.

In announcing the tentative agreement, on which the membership will vote at some point before a June 14 bankruptcy court deadline, IAM President Robert De Pace issued an ultimatum to union members, declaring, "This vote will not be about what the contract is. It's about whether you want your job or not."

The agreement sanctions the potential destruction of some 700 jobs by the company and retains an 11.5 percent pay cut. Other givebacks include the loss of one week's vacation, elimination of three holidays and the end of money paid for shift differentials.

The path by which future employees reach the top wage rate will be extended from five to nine years. Previously, Northwest paid 100 percent of retiree health insurance costs for workers 55 and older. The new agreement would lower the company's contribution to 50 percent.

The current retirement plan, which paid \$51 per month per year of service, will be frozen and replaced with an agreement by the company to contribute 5 percent of gross earnings to an IAM national pension plan once the carrier emerges from bankruptcy or 12 months from the date of contract ratification.

Back in March, IAM ramp workers rejected a similar concessionary agreement by a 60 percent margin. One of the major differences in the new agreement is that the IAM bureaucracy has cynically negotiated severance provisions for veteran workers who, demoralized by the dead-end they find themselves in, might provide the margin for passage of the new

agreement by voting to accept the new contract and get out while they can.

Another addition in the recent round of talks was the IAM's acquisition of a \$181 million unsecured claim from the airline that could potentially be turned into stock once the airline exits bankruptcy.

The blind alley into which the IAM has delivered Northwest ground workers cannot come as a surprise. This is a union leadership that scabbed on the strike by more than 4,000 Northwest mechanics. Like vultures, they are now seeking to organize strikebreakers and workers who crossed picket lines in order to offset the loss in dues money to their treasury as a result of Northwest's slashing of the jobs of ramp workers.

This is not a result of miscalculations by the leadership. The IAM and the AFL-CIO have viewed the withdrawal in recent years by Northwest mechanics from the IAM and flight attendants from the Teamsters as threatening their financial base in terms of lost dues revenue, and as disrupting their role as junior partners to Northwest and corporate management as a whole.

It is not only Northwest Airlines that viewed bankruptcy as a tool to be used against the workers. The AFL-CIO and, in particular, the IAM, welcomed the company's union-busting operation against the mechanics as an opportunity to recoup past losses.

The mechanics, upset with the pro-company orientation of the IAM, disaffiliated from it in 1998 and joined an independent craft union called the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), which is not a member of the AFL-CIO. In 2001, Northwest mechanics obtained a record-setting contract.

Northwest proceeded to carefully prepare a counterassault against the mechanics by financing a contingent of strikebreakers, and in August 2005 forced the independent union out on strike by demanding a 26

percent pay cut, the elimination of more than half of the AMFA mechanics' jobs, and the gutting of sick pay, health care coverage and pensions.

Last week's agreement reached by the IAM with Northwest is a shameless betrayal of the ground workers. Nevertheless, the IAM did not suffer the same degree of proportional wage cuts as were sustained by the pilots and are about to be imposed on the flight attendants. The IAM's backstabbing of the mechanics was calculated to curry favor with Northwest corporate management.

The tentative agreement with the IAM's ground workers has been preceded by agreements ratified by IAM customer service workers, who gave \$103 million back to Northwest, and pilots, who at the beginning of May conceded another \$306 million, which comes on top of an earlier round of cutbacks in 2004 that totaled \$250 million.

The cannibalism of the AFL-CIO continues apace as the Association of Flight Attendants and the Transport Workers Union take advantage of the disarray within the ranks of the independent Professional Association of Flight Attendants (PFAA) at Northwest in order to absorb the membership into their ranks. The PFAA has negotiated a 21 percent pay cut for flight attendants that will provide Northwest with another \$195 million in savings.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact