

Bush administration intervenes to block Northwest flight attendants' strike

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28 August 2006

At the urging of the Bush administration, a federal judge issued an injunction Friday to block a threatened job action by Northwest Airlines flight attendants. The attendants, who are facing new demands for massive wage cuts and other contract concessions from the airline, which is under the protection of a bankruptcy court, were set to begin a series of walkouts at various locations Friday night.

The ruling countered a decision by the bankruptcy judge, who refused to intervene in the dispute between the US's fifth largest air carrier and its 8,700 flight attendants.

In temporarily enjoining strike action, US District Judge Victor Marrero said Northwest had made a "persuasive case" and that he needed more time to study the situation. He gave the two sides until August 30 to report back to him on any progress in contract talks, but gave no indication when he might reach a final decision.

Earlier in the week, the Bush administration intervened on the side of management through the United States attorney's office in New York, which argued that the flight attendants' union should be blocked from conducting a job action against the imposition of a 40 percent cut in pay and benefits. The airline's contract terms reduce pay of senior flight attendants from \$42,000 to \$33,000 and impose a 30 percent increase in hours worked.

Northwest imposed its own terms on flight attendants July 31 after getting the bankruptcy court to void the old contract.

Concessions already negotiated with Northwest pilots and ground crews are contingent on the acceptance of similar cuts by all bargaining units. The flight attendants are the only group of workers at Northwest yet to ratify. Their successful defiance would void

contracts containing hundreds of millions in concessions with the other unions. The company is seeking \$1.4 billion in overall cuts from its unions, including \$195 million from flight attendants.

Following the court ruling, one flight attendant said, "When does it end? When does the company have to negotiate? Now they can do whatever they want."

Following the ruling, a spokesman for the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) said the union had suspended its plans for work stoppages beginning August 25, a strategy it calls CHAOS (Create Havoc Around Our System). Northwest has pledged to use supervisory staff to replace cabin crews in the event of isolated walkouts.

Flight attendants expressed the fear that the airlines are attempting to turn their jobs into short-term, high-turnover positions, similar to the conditions that existed in an earlier era, when flight attendants had to sign an agreement to leave at age 32.

Increasing the anger of Northwest workers is the fact that the company was profitable in the second quarter of 2006 and is expected to make money in the current quarter.

Flight attendants have twice voted to reject the concessions demanded by Northwest. They voted down the cuts by an 80 percent margin in June. In July, Northwest flight attendants voted out their previous union, the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA) and joined the AFA. Two weeks later, the AFA accepted a concessions package virtually identical to the one negotiated by the PFAA. Flight attendants voted down the renegotiated agreement by a 55 percent margin.

The confrontation with flight attendants follows similar showdowns with the other unions at Northwest. The process has underscored the irreconcilable

contradiction between the interests of Northwest workers and the treachery of the organizations that claim to represent them.

In August 2005, the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), the PFAA and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) scabbed on a strike by 4,400 Northwest mechanics, members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). The workers struck after Northwest demanded a 26 percent pay cut and the elimination of more than half of their jobs. As a consequence of the sabotage by the other unions, the mechanics strike was defeated and the workers replaced by strike-breakers.

The strikebreaking against the AMFA, a small independent craft union, was carried out with the full support of the AFL-CIO, which sought to directly profit from the debacle. AMFA had been certified in 1999 after mechanics, then members of the IAM, left their old union. In the 2005 strike, the AFL-CIO-affiliated IAM demanded that Northwest put certain jobs, formerly performed by AMFA members, under its jurisdiction.

After the defeat of the AMFA strike, the AFL-CIO targeted the PFAA, the other independent union at Northwest. The AFL-CIO-affiliated AFA filed a petition to displace the PFAA as the bargaining agent for the flight attendants.

When Northwest began demanding new concessions following its declaration of bankruptcy in September of 2005, the AFL-CIO sought to keep the different sections of workers apart. Negotiations by the various bargaining units were isolated from one another by the trade union bureaucracy in order to diffuse the opposition among rank-and-file workers to the latest attacks.

In March, Northwest secured the agreement of the Air Line Pilots Association for \$358 million in concessions, including a 24 percent pay cut, despite the fact that pilots had voted strike authorization by a 92 percent margin. The agreement also allowed Northwest to create a low-cost subsidiary to operate planes with less than a 76-seat capacity. Pilots previously took a 15 percent pay cut in 2004. Starting pay now stands at \$27,000.

In June, following the latest concessions deal, anger was so intense that the pilots union was forced to recall Mark McLain, chairman of the ALPA unit at

Northwest.

Baggage handlers and ground workers, members of the IAM agreed to \$190 million in concessions in June. The deal cut pay by 11 percent and accepted the elimination of 700 jobs.

There is no doubt that the other unions will cross the picket lines of flight attendants in the event of a strike, just as they did with the mechanics. In a statement quoted in the *New York Times* Friday, Duanne Worth, president of the pilots union, said the flight attendants would have to accept Northwest's terms. "Everyone knows where this has to end up," he declared.

The flight attendants union, the AFA, has not indicated what demands it is raising in opposition to Northwest's terms. The AFA leadership has made it clear that it believes flight attendants are obliged to accept concessions in order to help bail out the airline.

The union's CHAOS policy is designed to minimize the impact of strike action on Northwest. At the same time, it could make it easier for management to isolate and victimize militant groups of workers.



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