

US: Northwest Airlines cancels flights amid pilot shortage

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Northwest Airlines has cancelled hundreds of flights in the US in recent days, amidst a shortage of pilots and other problems brought on by downsizing and cost-cutting. Tens of thousands of passengers have already been affected in major disruptions that are expected to continue at least through the weekend.

As of 10:00 pm EST, 133 Northwest flights had been cancelled on Thursday, and many more were delayed, including 132 for over 45 minutes, according to Flightstats.com. On Wednesday, 241 flights (or 16 percent of scheduled flights) were canceled and 228 delayed for over 45 minutes. Problems at Northwest have been escalating, with total cancellations exceeding 1,000 flights during the past week.

Northwest is the fifth-largest airline carrier in the US, with major hubs in Detroit, Minneapolis, and Memphis, Tennessee. It emerged from bankruptcy proceedings at the end of May, after cutting \$1.4 billion in annual costs—mainly by slashing jobs, wages and benefits.

The principal cause of the cancellations appears to be a shortage of pilots. Under the contract ratified last year, pilots cannot be required to log more than 90 flight hours a month, an increase of 10 hours over the previous contract. Federal regulations place the limit for pilots in the US at 100 flight hours per month.

While the company was in bankruptcy, many pilots were furloughed. They have not yet been rehired. The shortage of pilots, combined with the beginning of the summer flying season, has meant that, even with the 10-hour increase, many pilots have reached their flight limits before the end of the month. Northwest has also suggested the bad weather during the month of June is a factor. Bad weather and other disruptions can lead to increased flight hours for pilots.

Cancellations and delays are expected to build up over the next few days, reaching a peak over the weekend preceding the July 4 holiday, before pilot flight hours reset at the beginning of the month.

Northwest is also claiming that a larger than usual number of pilots are calling in sick, though it has not released any

figures to back up this assertion. The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) has denied the existence of any deliberate slowdown, insisting that the delays are due entirely to short staffing.

“It’s a staffing issue,” ALPA spokesman Monty Montgomery told the *Detroit Free Press*. “Our pilots are operating at contractual limits. The summer flying season is in full swing, and we are operating at our max,” he said.

At the same time, Montgomery indicated that the ALPA is willing to work out an arrangement with the airline. “There is some potential for the pilots and company to agree to something where we would encourage our pilots to work the additional hours” beyond the 90-hour contractual limit, he told the *Detroit News*.

Whether or not there is any organized work action, there is no doubt that pilots are upset over the sharp wage and benefit cuts and increased work time imposed on them by the company, with the help of ALPA. Many pilots may be voicing their frustration by simply refusing to fly the additional overtime hours.

Northwest declared bankruptcy in September 2005 as a means of pressuring workers to accept concessions. In May 2006, ALPA agreed to a contract that included all of the \$348 million in annual cuts demanded by the company from the pilots. In addition to the increase in flight hours, the contract included a 23.9 percent pay cut, which came on top of a 15 percent pay cut already accepted by the pilots prior to bankruptcy.

Mark McClain, chairman of the Northwest airlines branch of ALPA, said at the time that the deal was a “painful but necessary part of a successful restructuring of Northwest Airlines.” Though ALPA supported the contract, and pilots faced the threat of a court-imposed deal if they did not agree to the cuts, only 63 percent of the pilots voted in favor—an indication of the widespread opposition. Before the deal was reached, pilots voted by a 92 percent margin to approve a strike.

The deal with ALPA came along with a similar concessions contract worked out with the Professional Flight

Attendants Association (PFAA). Flight attendants approved concessions of \$195 million a year by an extremely narrow margin last month, after voting down two previous contract agreements reached by the union.

Along with the International Association of Mechanics, ALPA and the PFAA had called on its members to cross the picket lines of Northwest members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) in August 2005. The mechanics' walkout was provoked by Northwest's demand for a 26 percent pay cut and the elimination of more than half their jobs. The strike was eventually smashed, and the strikers were replaced.

The present troubles at Northwest are an outcome of this assault on airline workers, made possible by the treachery of the trade unions. Wall Street investors have demanded downsizing at Northwest and other airlines to guarantee higher profits, but the process has also benefited company executives, who have reaped rewards from the bankruptcy process. After emerging from bankruptcy, the company doled out \$300 million in stock to the top 400 executives, including \$26 million to CEO Doug Steenland.

Northwest justified its enriching a small layer of executives and investors with the claim that this would make the airline more "efficient." In fact, as the recent cancellations and delays have made clear, it has done just the opposite. The basic ability of the company to function has been severely undermined.

Northwest is not alone in experiencing a sharp increase in delays and cancellations, and these problems have not been limited to the past week. All of the major airlines have carried out an aggressive campaign of cost cutting in recent years. Since 2002, four of the top five airlines in the US—US Airways, United, Delta and Northwest—have declared bankruptcy, imposing wage and job cuts in the process.

There are now enormous capacity strains at every level of the US airline industry, as companies have sought to cut costs by overbooking flights and eliminating routes, cutting jobs, forcing workers to work longer hours, and trimming any slack in the complex system of airline scheduling. As a result, problems that were once routinely managed now have the potential of causing major disruptions.

A June 26 article by Scott McCartney, who writes on the airline industry for the *Wall Street Journal*, noted, "The number of flights canceled in the first 15 days of June was up a whopping 91% compared with the same period last year, and the number of flights that were excessively late—more than 45 minutes—jumped 61%, according to FlightStats.com. Overall, 70.7% of all US flights arrived on time from June 1 through June 15, compared with 79% last year."

So far in 2007, only 72.46 percent of flights in the US have

been on time, a sharp drop from previous years, according to the federal Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

McCartney cites a number of incidents that have contributed to these delays. Earlier this month, for example, a computer glitch combined with weather problems led to long delays in the northeast and midwest. Last week, a single mistake shut down computer systems, producing delays that led to problems throughout the day.

There are several factors behind these delays, including aging infrastructure and technology, but these have been exacerbated by measures aimed at cutting costs and boosting profits. "With airlines packing planes fuller than ever," McCartney notes, "even small storms have cascaded into major disruptions for customers. With load factors approaching 90% or more on many days, finding available seats when customers miss connections or get stranded by cancellations has been difficult, and some travelers have been stranded for several days."

Problems in the US airline industry are not limited to the major companies that have been in and out of bankruptcy. In February, JetBlue, which had long been lauded as one of the most efficient of the low-cost carriers, experienced a catastrophic failure after an ice storm. Hundreds of passengers were left sitting on runways for hours. This was followed by a massive disruption in scheduling, including delays and 1,000 cancelled flights.

The protracted breakdown of the airline industry in the United States has become a paradigmatic example of the consequences of subordinating critical social infrastructure to the demands of private profit and individual wealth. It is only a matter of time before this structural decay finds expression, not only in increased delays, but also in a dangerous deterioration in airline safety.



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