

Northwest pilot shortage highlights growing airlines crisis

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Northwest Airlines, the fifth largest US carrier, cancelled hundreds of flights over the past several days as exhausted pilots and flight attendants neared their monthly limit on flying time. Northwest, which came out of bankruptcy in May, has cut staffing and pay while increasing workloads as part of huge concessions it has imposed in recent years. The airline currently employs some 5,000 pilots.

Northwest reported this week a second quarter profit of \$273 million. Its sales, meanwhile, were down three percent from the same period one year ago.

The airline cancelled 526 flights in the period Friday through Sunday, out of a total of 4,187. On Monday, Northwest cancelled more than one hundred flights. Operations are expected to return to normal August 1, when the monthly 90-hour limit on pilot work hours resets to zero. August, however, is another heavy travel month with flight demand peaking toward the end of the month, the start of the Labor Day weekend.

In June Northwest faced a similar month-end pilot shortage. The airline cancelled 2,148 flights, including more than 1,000 flights during the last week of the month. As a consequence the air carrier said it reduced its July schedule in response to the problems and continued to recall pilots on furlough. It announced a further four percent reduction in flights for August. However, the company denies overworking flight crews, blaming excessive pilot absenteeism for the cancellations.

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) reports that many pilots recalled by Northwest are refusing to return. Some have found other employment and others are reluctant to come back under present conditions. The union denies that the pilots are engaged in any job action.

The conditions facing flight crews are a direct

outcome of the betrayals carried out by the unions at Northwest and other major airlines. Over the past few years the unions have surrendered massive concessions, including mandatory increases in flight time and reduced staffing levels. All airlines recorded increased flight cancellations through June, with Northwest having the highest number of incidents.

According to flightstats.com, US air carriers cancelled 100,000 flights in June, twice the number from one year ago. For the first half of the year cancellations rose 54 percent. One third of flights nationwide were delayed during the first two weeks of July.

Northwest suffered a seven-fold increase in cancellations in June from one year ago while American Airlines cancellations rose almost four times. Discount carrier Jet Blue saw a ten-fold increase.

This crisis, which inevitably places not only the comfort but the safety of airline passengers in jeopardy, underscores the consequences of the subordination of air travel to the drive for corporate profit. This process was accelerated by the deregulation of the airline industry started by the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter in 1978 and the wave of union busting that followed, including the firing of 13,000 PATCO air traffic controllers by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

In order to reduce costs, airlines have slashed employment far below the levels needed to ensure the safe and efficient functioning of the system. The result has been chaos for air travelers and an increased potential for catastrophic accidents as overworked crews are pressured to continue flying past all reasonable limits.

The pilots' union at Northwest surrendered a 15 percent pay cut in 2004, followed by another 24 percent

cut in 2006. The pilots also lost retirement benefits and suffered cuts in medical insurance. New work rules increased the monthly flight maximum to 90 hours, up from 80. While previously the company had to pay overtime for hours flown exceeding 80, pilots no longer receive overtime. Flight attendants gave up a 40 percent cut in wages and benefits in the same period.

Northwest broke a strike by its mechanics in 2005 with the aid of ALPA and other unions. The mechanics had resisted demands for a 26 percent pay cut and a 50 percent reduction in jobs.

The company filed for bankruptcy in 2005, using it as an opportunity to default on its pension obligations and extract additional concessions from workers. All told the company reportedly slashed some \$1.4 billion in annual labor costs.

The deal bringing Northwest out of bankruptcy contained huge payouts to executives. CEO Douglas Steenland got \$26.6 million in stock options. Outgoing chairman Gary Wilson got \$2 million as well as lifetime medical and dental insurance. Altogether, top managers received \$297 million in stock.

Under these conditions Northwest is having difficulty finding and retaining adequate staff. Northwest has reportedly tapped its entire pool of furloughed pilots. However, recalled pilots must be retrained before they can return to work, a process industry analysts says will take at least 40 days. The company also says it plans to hire 250 to 350 new pilots over the course of the next year, but these workers must also undergo extensive training.

The airline is currently in talks with ALPA concerning the staffing shortage. Northwest appears willing to accept a slight reduction in the 90-hour flying limit.

Postings on weblogs and online forums give some indication of the enormous stress and anger building up among pilots and flight attendants. There are indications that pilots are being pressured to work past the contractually stipulated maximum of 90 hours.

A retired pilot from Minnesota wrote in one online forum, "Well, it isn't just a shortage of pilots at NWA, but a world wide shortage of pilots. Why do you think that is? It's because pilots are being asked to fly multi-million dollar aircraft that are highly technical pieces of equipment, with up to 400 passengers and crew. They are expected to know the systems of the aircraft they

fly, that are usually covered in two huge manuals. They are expected to be 100% proficient in domestic and international flight rules and regulations, they are expected to hold a 4 year college degree. They are expected to know how to manage a flight crew, execute emergencies, many of which are not in the book.

"They are trusted with all of the above and treated as though none of it sums up to being any more than a glorified bus driver."

He continued, "The job has gotten to be so undesirable that many pilots are leaving the ranks early to seek other occupations outside of the industry and many, many pilots, who are a part of the baby boom generation are being forced to retire at the age of 60, with no one to replace them. The military is not offering as many pilots to the industry as once was the case because a military pilot must put in 9-10 years in the military before leaving. This is half way to the 20 year retirement package that lies ahead and quite frankly, they would be taking a hell of a pay cut these days to leave the military for the airlines, only to face a crappy future."

A flight attendant wrote, "as a soon to be (ex-Northwest flight attendant) on leave, I am scared for those friends of mine still flying and have no choice but to stick around. The NWA management is deplorable, and continually treats their employees and customers with a disrespectful manner that if it continues will put this company out of business. NWA will step over a dollar to save a dime!"



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