

US pilots strike shuts down Spirit Airlines

A WSWS reporting team
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Pilots at discount air carrier Spirit Airlines struck early Saturday after talks involving a federal mediator broke down. The 450 pilots are seeking wage parity with workers at other low-cost airlines such as Jet Blue and AirTran Airways. It is the first strike at a major US airline since the walkout by Northwest Airline mechanics five years ago.

The strike forced Spirit to cancel all flights over the weekend. Earlier, the airline had claimed that it would be able to maintain operations in the event of a strike by contracting out flights to other airlines. About 18,000 passengers were booked to fly on Saturday. Spirit employs some 2,000 workers and accounts for around 1 percent of US air travel.

Picketing is continuing at New York's LaGuardia Airport and at airports in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Detroit; and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the airline's hub, where there was a large turnout of support on Saturday.

Spirit has posted a profit in each of the last three years, largely due to the rock bottom wages it pays its employees. In the fourth quarter of 2009 it posted the largest profit margin, 12.4 percent, of all the airlines surveyed by the US Department of Transportation.

The walkout comes as negotiations continue at other major airlines. Currently, there are 52 negotiations covering 30 airlines in federal mediation. That total includes 650 Spirit flight attendants.

Over the past decade, workers in the airline industry have been forced to take one round of concessions after another. Spirit pilots say they are determined to resist further erosion in pay and working conditions. They have been without a contract since 2006.

Spirit says it offered pilots a 30 percent wage increase "net of productivity" over five years. However, according to a spokesman for the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA), the company offer really covers a

period of eight-and-a-half years, since pilots have been without a pay raise since 2006.

ALPA called the strike only under enormous pressure from pilots, who had seen negotiations drag on for years with no progress. Talks reportedly continued right up until the strike deadline.

Spirit CEO Ben Baldanza said the company has not formally asked President Obama to intervene to force pilots back to work, but added that "we would be open to it." He continued, "We believe it would be in the public interest."

The Railway Labor Act, which governs rail and airline labor negotiations, grants the president broad powers to halt strikes.

A WSWS reporting team visited the picket line at Detroit Metropolitan Airport Sunday. Carlos Cueto, a Spirit Airlines pilot and council representative for ALPA, told the WSWS that the pilots are trying to maintain parity with Jet Blue and Air Tran.

"We've been trying for four years. Finally, we were released by the mediation board to strike. Spirit wanted to change all our work rules and impose a ridiculous pay scale compared with the other discount carriers.

"Our pay is substandard. It has been a downhill movement since 9/11. Our job is complicated, and it is hard on the individuals and their families. After 9/11 all the airlines claimed to be struggling, so they needed concessions, which were made at the expense of the workers. But things have changed. In 2009, they made \$80 million in profit."

As it stands, pilots for the discount carriers make up to 40 percent less than their counterparts at the major airlines. Further cuts would place them in the category of the low-wage pilots that fly for regional carriers such as Pinnacle, which is owned by the company whose plane crashed on its approach to the airport at Buffalo, New York last year, killing all on board. "We'd be a hair away from them in terms of pay scale," Cueto said.

In addition to its substandard pay offer, Spirit is seeking other concessions, including requiring pilots to assist in cleaning airplanes between flights, imposing increases in health care premiums, and basing longevity payments on hours flown rather than years of service. This last demand could undermine safety by compelling pilots to work longer hours.

The pilots are distrustful of any long-term agreement with the carrier, which is owned by two private hedge funds—Indigo Partners LLC and Oaktree Capital Management LLC. In April the company made headlines, while outraging passengers, by imposing a charge of up to \$45 dollars for carry-on luggage, to take effect in August.

Sean Creed, the chairman of the ALPA unit at Spirit, said the union would have no problem if other airlines honored Spirit tickets.

Spirit workers face great dangers if their strike remains isolated by ALPA. The Northwest mechanics were defeated in 2005 as a result of scabbing by the AFL-CIO and other unions at the carrier.

A defeat of the Spirit pilots would be used to blackmail and intimidate workers across the industry. All pilots, flight attendants and ground workers must be mobilized in a common struggle industry-wide against substandard pay and benefits and understaffing.

Workers must also guard against any illusions in the Obama administration. Any federal intervention would be to assist management in imposing new concessions on the pilots.



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