

Spirit Airlines pilots strike enters fourth day

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The strike by pilots at Spirit Airlines is entering its fourth day with the airline announcing that it is canceling all flights through June 16. Four hundred and fifty pilots struck the low-cost air carrier June 12 seeking improvements in pay to bring them to the level of other discount airlines.

Plans by Spirit to maintain operations by contracting service with other airlines broke down when pilots refused to handle its flights. According to one Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) representative, even pilots at nonunion carriers refused management requests to act as strikebreakers.

The National Mediation Board, (NMB), which oversees airline negotiations, ordered pilots and management representatives to resume negotiations Tuesday.

Spirit's major hubs are in Detroit, Michigan, and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Much of its traffic is to vacation destinations in the Bahamas and Caribbean. The airline has been profitable in recent years despite the global recession due to the low wages it pays. It recently angered air travelers by announcing plans to charge a \$45 fee for carry-on luggage.

Spirit continued selling tickets right to the eve of the strike, assuring passengers they would not be stranded. Now, Spirit customers are being told they will have to pay out of pocket for tickets on other airlines if they want to reach their destinations. Passengers are complaining that they cannot reach the airline's customer service line.

Spirit pilots had been working for years under terms of the previous contract while negotiations dragged on. In May, the NMB declared an impasse. However, pilots had to wait out an additional 30-day "cooling off" period before being in a legal position to strike.

Workers throughout the airline industry are watching

the Spirit strike, which is challenging years of concessions throughout the airline industry. Contract negotiations are continuing under federal mediation at 30 airlines. Pilots at AirTran took a strike vote on May 17, with 98 percent voting yes. Contract talks for 1,700 pilots at the second-largest low-cost carrier have gone nowhere after five years. In 2007, pilots voted down a contract proposed by ALPA.

Meanwhile, American Airlines is prepared to train managers as flight attendants, should contract negotiations result in a strike. Some 16,000 American flight attendants voted to authorize strike action last month. The union has requested NMB grant strike authorization.

The NMB recently denied a request by the Teamsters for strike authorization for 1,400 aircraft mechanics employed by United Parcel Service. Talks have continued for four years with no agreement.

There has been no strike at any major US airline since the disastrous strike by Northwest mechanics in 2005. Northwest broke that strike with the assistance of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, which had their members cross the picket lines.

The WSWs spoke to pilots and other airline workers at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The Detroit Police Department has limited picketing outside the terminal, with pilots and their supporters shunted into a small area away from the main passenger entrance.

Corey O'Keefe, a striking pilot, told the WSWs that Spirit pilots make substantially less than pilots at the major airlines. "We are striking because we are not being paid what we are worth." He said that pilots take on a tremendous responsibility, but airline management treats them like they are disposable. "I am willing to strike for as long as it takes," he added.

Corey's brother, Kerry, a second-generation airline

worker employed at American Airlines, also spoke to the WSWS. “The way corporate America sees it, the CEOs are more important than the people running the airlines, but nothing moves without the workers. Since 9-11, everything has changed. It is a different place to work.

“I think it is a shame the way they treat the pilots. They want to make them work more, but pay them half. The pilots and other workers are important to the company when it come to saving them money, but they are not worth anything when they demand an increase in pay?

“For management, it is about what they can get now at the expense of the workers. The workers feel they have to walk on eggshells. They want you to deliver twice as much as you did before.”

Kerry recounted how the pilot who brought the US Air flight down in New York on the Hudson River was correctly hailed as a hero, but pilots perform feats saving lives and money for the airlines every day without any acknowledgement.

“I know my brother has saved the company millions by returning hobbled flights, or flights in disrepair. On a daily basis he is making critical decisions, and this is how they treat him just for a few dollars? It’s terrible.

“A pilot is worth millions who can get a broken airplane back safely, but all he got was a letter in his file. They next day they wanted him to go on strike.

“We took big concessions in 2001-2002. Northwest Airlines then mirrored our contract. I lost \$20,000 a year. They took away one week’s vacation from us from the day of the contract. We used to get 12 holidays paid at double time and a half, now we get 5 at time and a half. We used to get 10 sick days a year, now we get 5.”



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