

Pilots union ends Spirit Airlines strike

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The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) ordered striking pilots at Spirit Airlines back to work Thursday shortly after announcing a tentative contract agreement in the six-day strike. The union released few details of the settlement. A ratification vote is not scheduled until sometime in July.

Under such conditions there can be little doubt that the agreement represents a capitulation to Spirit management, which boasts the lowest wages and highest profits among major airlines. The 450 Spirit pilots were demanding wage parity with pilots at other discount carriers such as AirTran and JetBlue. Spirit pilots earn pay about 20 to 40 percent below that of pilots at other major carriers.

Sean Creed, head of Spirit's ALPA unit, called the deal a "fair and affordable agreement." He indicated the tentative contract did not achieve the goal of parity, merely stating that it brought Spirit pilots "closer to where they need to be." Creed admitted the proposal accepted by ALPA did not contain additional money, but only shifted proposed pay increases closer to the start of the five-year contract.

Spirit for its part issued a statement praising the settlement, calling it "a fair and equitable agreement that will ensure the long term stability of the company." An email sent to customers said the agreement, "allows us to be successful for years to come and achieve our mission of continuing to bring you ultra low fares."

Spirit had offered a 29 percent pay increase over the life of a five-year contract. It also wanted major concessions, including increased health care premiums and a proposal to base longevity payments on hours flown rather than years of service, which would have the effect of forcing pilots to work longer hours. There was no indication on the status of these issues in the new agreement.

Pilots had been without a raise since 2006. Negotiations had continued since then without

progress.

Both ALPA and Spirit management were clearly taken aback by the powerful support won by the Spirit pilots. The airline had to cancel plans to continue service during the strike using chartered aircraft when it could not find pilots willing to fly the planes.

With 100,000 US airline workers currently in contract negotiations ALPA clearly feared that a prolonged strike by Spirit pilots could converge with the struggles of other airline workers in the US and globally, who have suffered years of concessions and job cuts. Pilots at Jazz airlines, a low-cost subsidiary of Air Canada, are threatening a strike. The 1,500 pilots have been without a contract since last June. Flight attendants at the airline are also poised to strike.

A job action by pilots at Antigua-based LIAT Airlines caused flight disruptions throughout the Caribbean Wednesday and Thursday. The pilots say they are protesting lack of progress by management in addressing their grievances. A statement by the Leeward Islands Airline Pilots Association pointed to the strike by Spirit pilots as well as the dispute at Jazz and the recent strike by British Airways cabin crew, noting that workers at all those airlines faced disputes involved long outstanding issues similar to those at LIAT.

In the US, Pilots at AirTran took a strike authorization vote on May 17. The 1,650 pilots have been in contract talks since 2005. American Airlines flight attendants have also voted to strike while American pilots and ground workers are continuing talks that show no sign of progress.

Reactionary US laws make strikes in the airline industry extremely difficult. The National Mediation Board covers all airline negotiations and must grant permission before a union is freed to strike. Further, any strike that seriously disrupts air travel can be halted by presidential order.

The NMB has kept airline workers tied up in fruitless negotiations for years while pay and benefits have remained frozen. Meanwhile, US airline profits are rebounding. Globally, airlines are expected to record \$2.5 billion in profits in 2010, a sharp turnaround from 2009, which saw enormous losses.

ALPA claimed the election of the Obama administration would lead to a reversal of the pro-management policies of the NMB. In fact, Obama appointed two former airline union officials to the three-member board. But the policies of the NMB remained essentially unchanged and it continues to suppress the struggles of airline workers. Almost year and a half into the term of the Obama administration, the Spirit pilots union is the first airline bargaining unit to receive strike authorization.

There is nothing anomalous in this. The pro-business trade union bureaucracy and the Obama administration are equally determined to strangle any movement of the working class that threatens to undermine the profitability and “global competitiveness” of the US airline industry.



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