

Corporate war at home continues

Bush moves to block strike by United Airlines mechanics

By Jerry White
22 November 2001

The White House announced Tuesday that President Bush would block a strike by 15,000 mechanics at United Airlines set to begin next month. Bush's spokesman, Ari Fleischer, said the president was prepared to do "whatever it takes" to prevent a walkout.

The White House announcement followed the decision by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to reject binding arbitration and announce plans to strike the nation's number one air carrier, following 23 months of stalled negotiations for a new labor contract. IAM officials charged the company with failing to bargain in good faith in order to block wage and benefit improvements.

Union officials said mechanics would strike if a deal was not reached before the expiration of a 30-day "cooling-off period" required by federal law. The mechanics will have a legal right to strike in late December, during the height of the holiday traveling season. Under terms of the Railway Labor Act, however, Bush can outlaw strike action by declaring an emergency and appointing a three-member emergency board to make recommendations for a settlement. If an impasse still exists after 60 days, Congress will have the legal authority to pass legislation imposing a contract.

United executives immediately hailed the president's announcement, which clearly weakens the position of the workers and undercuts their leverage in negotiating a decent contract. Corporate spokesman Andy Plews said, "We welcome the president's commitment to protect the traveling public. Yesterday, we took the step of reassuring our customers that they should book with confidence, because we don't expect that this

situation will lead to any disruption of our schedule."

The president's action comes on the heels of a temporary restraining order issued last week by a federal judge in Illinois instructing United mechanics to stop what airline officials claimed was an illegal job action that caused large numbers of maintenance-related flight cancellations. The court action was widely seen as a threat to levy massive fines against the union and individual mechanics, similar to the \$45.5 million a Dallas judge ordered a pilots' union to pay American Airlines for an alleged sick-out by its members in 1999.

This is the third time this year Bush has intervened or threatened to intervene on behalf of the airlines to block strikes by workers, including Northwest mechanics, Delta pilots and American flight attendants. In March after stopping a strike by Northwest mechanics Bush declared, "I intend to take the necessary steps to prevent airline strikes from happening this year."

In the context of recent developments, Bush's intervention raises even more ominous threats to workers' rights. Given the sweeping legal changes under the government's new anti-terrorism law—most of which are not known to the public—and the battery of executive orders imposed by the president in recent days, it is legitimate to ask whether the mechanics might be charged with "terrorist" crimes if they defied the president's order. Several civil liberties advocates have pointed out that the new law's definition of terrorism—"an attempt to intimidate or coerce a civilian population" or change "the policy of the government by intimidation or coercion"—is so broad, it could include labor strikes or other forms of working class

struggle.

Bush's pre-emptive strike-breaking takes place as the airlines are conducting a systematic attack on the jobs, living standards and working conditions of tens of thousands of airline workers. After reaping massive profits during the 1990s—due in no small part to concessions accepted by the airline unions at the beginning of the decade—the industry was hit hard by the economic downturn in the US over the last year.

Even before September 11, Wall Street analysts were complaining of costly labor contracts and demanding that the airlines cut costs. The airlines then seized on the events of September 11 to implement downsizing and cost-cutting plans prepared well in advance and demand a multi-billion-dollar bailout at taxpayer expense. United eliminated the jobs of 20,000 pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and ground crew workers as part of the nearly 150,000 airline workers laid off throughout the industry.

The Bush administration's \$5 billion federal bailout for the industry—which included \$802 million for United alone—did nothing for the tens of thousands of airline workers losing their jobs. Laid off workers who were anticipating at least a temporary extension of unemployment payments or health care benefits did not receive a penny.

The bailout did not touch the multi-million-dollar compensation packages and “golden parachutes” enjoyed by the airline executives. While a typical laid off United flight attendant received about \$220 a week in jobless benefits, United's CEO Jim Goodwin—whose base salary was nearly \$1 million—left the company in October with three years of health care benefits, a company car, a country club membership and a severance package of more than \$3.2 million.

In the face of Bush's latest attack on the right to strike, the leadership of the AFL-CIO union federation has remained silent. This is not surprising, given the AFL-CIO's long record of betraying the workers' interests in favor of establishing closer relations with corporate America, and its consistent support for American imperialism's military actions overseas.

The efforts of the union bureaucracy to accommodate itself to the demands of big business and collaborate with management are epitomized by the situation at United, a so-called “employee-owned” company, where officials from the machinists' and pilots' unions

sit on the company board of directors.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney signaled his willingness to collaborate with big business and the Bush administration even further, declaring, “The attack on America will only... inspire both business and labor to work together to overcome many of the issues that have divided us.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>