

Northwest Airlines prepares union-busting assault against mechanics

AFL-CIO plans to scab on strike/lockout

By Shannon Jones
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Management at Northwest Airlines is organizing a massive strikebreaking operation against its 4,400 mechanics and cleaners, members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). The airline is seeking to provoke a strike on August 20, when a 30-day cooling-off period expires, by demanding sweeping concessions totaling \$176 million a year. These include a huge wage cut and the elimination of 50 percent of the mechanics' jobs. Should the union decide not to strike, Northwest is poised to declare a lockout.

In addition to these concessions, Northwest is demanding a freeze on workers' pensions and their transformation from defined benefit plans into 401(k)-type "defined contribution" plans. This would subject the workers' pensions to the vagaries of the stock market and mean, in practice, a steep cut in retirement pay.

The company, which has lost more than \$3.1 billion since 2001 and continues to lose money under conditions of soaring fuel prices, is threatening to file for bankruptcy protection should it fail to impose its demands on the workers. It would then follow the lead of United Airlines and US Airways, utilizing the services of a bankruptcy judge to terminate pension plans and impose its wage and benefit cuts.

Northwest says it plans to continue full operation in the event of a strike or lockout. It claims to have more than 3,000 strikebreakers available and is also preparing to contract out AMFA members' work to outside maintenance companies.

In addition, Northwest says it has lined up 1,500 flight attendants to be used against members of the Professional Flight Attendants Association (PFAA)

should they refuse to cross mechanics' picket lines. Strikebreakers are already being housed near Detroit Metropolitan Airport, Northwest's largest hub, in motel and hotel rooms rented by the company.

The flight attendants' union is conducting a strike authorization vote to sanction a sympathy strike in support of the mechanics.

The current assault on the workforce is the culmination of more than a decade of wage cuts and other concessions. Over the past several years, Northwest has laid off thousands of its experienced mechanics, sending the work to low-wage outside maintenance companies.

Northwest claims that strikebreakers hired in Minneapolis and Detroit will only be temporary replacements. However, it says permanent replacements will be hired at some point if the strike or lockout continues. Maintenance contracted out at other cities will be on a permanent basis.

Since the beginning of the year, top Northwest executives have been frantically dumping company stock. According to press reports, Northwest Chairman Gary Wilson, the largest Northwest stockholder, has sold more than half of his shares since mid-May. Apart from personal profiteering, the sale of stock by top executives is aimed at undermining the company's financial position and driving it toward bankruptcy.

AMFA has rejected the full list of cuts proposed by Northwest, which include the elimination of 2,800 jobs, a 26 percent pay cut and concessions covering benefits and work rules. In July, a federal mediator declared an impasse in bargaining, freeing the union to strike after a 30-day "cooling-off" period. Management will also be free on that date to impose new contract terms or

institute a lockout.

The mechanics' union offered to accept a 16 percent wage cut, but the airline rejected this proposal out of hand.

Northwest is also demanding that its flight attendants accept \$143 million in concessions, including a 20 percent wage cut, a sharp increase in outsourcing, and drastic changes in working conditions that would reduce rest periods and impose more flexible schedules. In all, the airline is demanding \$1.1 billion per year in contract concessions from its unions, which include, in addition to the mechanics and flight attendants, the International Association of Machinists (IAM)—representing baggage handlers, customer service agents, reservation agents and skycaps—and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA).

Last December, ALPA accepted \$265 in cuts and has publicly criticized the mechanics for resisting the company's demands. It is preparing to cross the mechanics' picket lines and scab on their strike or lockout. All indications are that the IAM will likewise scab on the mechanics and flight attendants. Both of these unions are part of the AFL-CIO union federation, while AMFA and PFAA are outside the federation.

Angry over concessions and lack of representation, Northwest mechanics disaffiliated from the IAM in 1998, voting to join the independent AMFA, a small craft union. Similarly, Northwest flight attendants disaffiliated from the Teamsters union in 2003 to form their independent union, PFAA.

Northwest can proceed confidently and brazenly because of the treachery and impotence of the official labor movement. Scabbing by AFL-CIO-affiliated unions is a component part of management's plans. Northwest has lined up ground crew workers, members of the IAM, to perform tasks normally carried out by AMFA members, including cleaning airplanes and guiding airplanes out of gates. The IAM agreed to a separate concessions agreement with Northwest for ground workers, undercutting the position of mechanics.

For its part, the national leadership of the AFL-CIO has issued a bitter denunciation, not of Northwest Airlines, but of the mechanics' union. According to an Associated Press report, Stewart Acuff, national AFL-CIO organizing director, called the AMFA a "renegade, raiding organization that is creating havoc

in the airline industry," adding, "It's not in the house of labor. It doesn't have the strength of 11 million AFL-CIO workers behind it."

Underscoring the falsity of its claims to represent an alternative to the AFL-CIO, the newly formed Change to Win coalition, the group of five unions that recently left the federation, has remained silent on the threat of Northwest union-busting.

The fact that, a few years after breaking from the AFL-CIO, Northwest mechanics and flight attendants find themselves under siege underscores a critical lesson of more than two decades of defeats for the American working class at the hands of the government and big business: there is no way to defend jobs and living standards within a narrow trade union framework.

The struggle to defend the jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions of airline workers requires a change in perspective. Instead of workers subordinating their demands to the requirements of the capitalist market and the profit demands of big business, workers must fight to reorganize economic life to meet the needs of the working class and society at large. This requires placing the airlines and other vital industries under public ownership on a popular and democratic basis.

Moreover, in the era of transnational corporations, the working class must have a global strategy. The idea that even the largest national labor organizations can successfully fight giant multinationals, able to shift production all over the globe, is an illusion. More than ever, the working class needs to unite on an international basis.

These are political tasks that can be achieved only through the establishment of the political independence of the working class. The ever more ruthless offensive of the corporations must be countered by a break from the two-party system and the building of a mass, socialist party of the working class.

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