

After flight attendants reject contract, American Airlines makes offer to pilots

By Shannon Jones
14 November 2014

Following the rejection of a union-backed tentative contract by American Airlines flight attendants, the company has tabled a proposal to pilots. The contract combines the agreements of American pilots with those of US Airways, which recently merged with American.

Initial reports indicate pilots are overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal, which, like the offer presented to flight attendants, removes profit sharing while providing an inadequate wage increase to workers after more than a decade of concessions.

Management reportedly withdrew a demand that it be permitted up to 81 seats on regional jets flown by US Airways and American Eagle--one of America's low-cost regional airlines. The contract being offered to Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) does not cover the much lower-paid pilots employed by the regional subsidiaries of American who belong to another union. Under terms of the previous contract there is a 76-seat maximum for planes flown by the cut-rate carriers.

At the same time American called for adding five seats to the medium-size regional jets. The move would dramatically increase the number of 70-seat jets flown by American's regional affiliates.

Last week another American subsidiary, Envoy Air, announced the closure of its Miami, Florida hub, at least temporarily laying off 478 workers. The Envoy Air pilots and flight attendants based there will be moved to other locations. Some 50 positions will be permanently eliminated in the move.

The head of ALPA at Envoy called the closure a "punitive decision," saying it would impose undue hardships on those forced to relocate. However, the pilots' union advanced no proposal to oppose the shutdown, merely offering counseling to displaced workers.

Earlier this year Envoy pilots rejected a contract proposal that would have frozen wages in exchange for a promise to maintain current employment levels. The company had threatened to shift to larger 76-seat aircraft, which would be flown by another American subsidiary. The company is now acting on that threat.

Meanwhile, the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) says it will not reopen negotiations with the company following the defeat of its contract proposal by a vote of 8,196 against to 8,180 in favor. Instead APFA and American are heading to binding arbitration, which is set to begin in December. Under terms accepted by APFA the outcome of arbitration is capped at \$111 million in added economic value. That would amount to an \$83 million reduction from the recently rejected offer.

American and US Airways flight attendants were outraged by the terms of the tentative agreement accepted by APFA. Flight attendants are in no mood for additional givebacks under conditions where they have given up round after round of concessions over the past decade. Workers were particularly provoked by the elimination of profit sharing under conditions where the company is posting record earnings. In addition, work rule changes would negate the value of pay raises contained in the agreement.

A flight attendant who wrote into the *Dallas News* gave the following comments: "Remember Delta is receiving the same pay raises as this proposal contained plus an additional 15% of their pay in profit sharing on top of the raises that we were presented with.

"This contract was clearly not even 'industry standard'--let alone 'industry leading.'

"Further, there were a lot of additional post-bankruptcy concessions contained in AA's proposal--we were never given the valuation of those

additional concessions and were told by our union that those numbers were ‘confidential.’

“What was painfully apparent to most no voters was the fact that the company offered \$82 million in pay raises with one hand, and turned right around and took back \$82 million in work rule and productivity concessions with the other hand.”

In a video posted on YouTube a US Airways flight attendant denounced the “lies and misinformation” spread by APFA, calling the “no” vote on the contract a “referendum for change.” She rejected the claim by APFA that the new contract represented the best of the two contracts it replaces, noting in particular the changes to health care and profit sharing.

She also called for full seniority rights for former Trans World Airlines (TWA) flight attendants working for American, which acquired TWA in 2001 after the latter filed for bankruptcy. At the time TWA flight attendants were put at the bottom of the seniority list, making all former TWA flight attendants junior to American flight attendants hired prior to the 2001 acquisition. As a result, all the former TWA flight attendants were furloughed when American downsized in 2003. Many were subsequently recalled, but remained at the bottom of the seniority list. To add insult to injury, APFA demanded that former TWA workers pay back union dues covering the period they were furloughed.

A group of former TWA flight attendants are currently suing American and APFA to demand seniority based on their actual hire date with TWA, a move bitterly opposed by APFA.

The “no” vote by American and US Airways flight attendants is a welcome development and reflects a growing spirit of militancy among airline workers in the US and internationally. It follows strikes by pilots at Lufthansa and Air France.

The rejection vote by flight attendants can serve as a starting point for a broader offensive by airline workers to regain the massive concessions that have been extracted by the major air carriers over the past two decades. However, this requires that airline workers examine the experience of the past period.

The major roadblock in the fight to secure decent wages and pensions, safe working conditions and jobs are the airline unions. Decades of collaboration with management have transformed these organizations into

bought and paid for tools of the corporate bosses. The six-figure salaries and lavish expense accounts enjoyed by union executives such as APFA President Laura Glading are the reward from management for services rendered.

Over the last three decades tens of thousands of airline workers have been the victims of airline deregulation, spearheaded by the Democratic Party, and the wave of bankruptcies, mergers and defeated strikes that followed, from PATCO and Continental to Eastern Airlines and Northwest Airlines. In every case, the unions, tied to the two big business parties and the capitalist system they defend, have aided and abetted the corporate attack on jobs, living standards, working conditions and pensions.

Appeals to union officials to respect and defend the interests of flight attendants are useless. What is needed is the building of new rank-and-file-based fighting organizations. These organizations must be independent of the unions, corporate management and the two big business political parties. They must make appeals to workers at all the other airlines in the US and worldwide as well as the traveling public.

Above all workers need a new political strategy. The profit system has failed, offering the prospect of only more downsizing and immiseration. The working class must advance a socialist program, calling for the placing of the banks, the airlines and giant industrial corporations under the democratic ownership and control of the working class. This requires the building of an independent political party of the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call on airline workers interested in such a struggle to contact us and undertake the building of the new revolutionary leadership that is urgently needed.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>