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United States

Northwest Mechanics Strike Against Deep Pay/Benefit Cuts, Layoffs, Outsourcing

- News from around the world -

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Close to 4,400 mechanics, cleaners, and maintenance workers at Northwest Airlines (NWA) walked off the job August 20. The strike, called by the independent Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), is the first major airline strike since Northwest pilots struck in 1998.

The strike represents the labor movement's first test since the recent AFL-CIO split and, so far, it seems that leaders on both sides of the split are failing spectacularly, refusing to pledge support to the strikers and even encouraging union members to cross the lines. Despite these failures, support has been strong at the local level—particularly at Northwest hubs in Detroit, Minneapolis, and San Francisco.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mechanics.jpg>]

The strikers are fighting a proposed 25.7 percent pay cut, layoffs for over half the unit's workforce, reduced sick pay, reduced vacation/holidays, increased health care costs, a pension freeze, and increased outsourcing to non-union shops.

Said Steve MacFarlane, a 25-year NWA mechanic and AMFA assistant national director, "This has ramifications for the entire labor movement. If we can't fight back under these kinds of circumstances, we're finished."

Eric Yubian, a NWA mechanic at New York's LaGuardia airport, explained that, "The guys believe in what they're standing for. There might be bad blood between the unions, but this is bigger than that."

LOCAL SOLIDARITY

Though AMFA has struggled to get support nationally, strikers have received a good deal of support at the local level. Said Yubian, "union members are supporting us, even if the union does not."

Yubian noted that members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), Machinists (IAM), and Teamsters all showed support for the picket lines. "Gate agents (represented by IAM) dropped off food and water to support the lines, and gave us information about flight delays and maintenance problems. Ramp personnel (also IAM) got us information as well."

Chuck Schalk, an American Airlines mechanic in TWU Local 562 in New York, walked the line at LaGuardia Airport. "A strike is a strike," he said. "Corporate America is going after unions in this country, and here's a union standing up and saying, 'enough is enough.' If we don't support them, we're just as bad as the bosses."

As in New York, TWU members walked the lines in Dallas and other cities. In Detroit, pickets included among others members of IAM Local 141, UAW Local 600, and Southeast Michigan Jobs with Justice.

UPHILL FIGHT

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Though pickets were spirited and NWA had to cancel 25 percent of its flights on the strike's first day, AMFA faces an uphill fight.

Since the post-9/11 airline industry meltdown, airline unions have faced a relentless management assault on their wages, benefits, and pensions. Under the gun of bankruptcy threats, in an increasingly hostile political climate, union after union in the industry has surrendered, taking massive concessions with little talk of fighting back.

"Nine months of negotiations and [NWA management's] offer hasn't changed a dime," said MacFarlane. "I mean, how low can we go here?"

Management planned its anti-strike moves for 14 months. As soon as the strike began, NWA outsourced the bulk of its aircraft maintenance and brought in an estimated 1,400 scabs to do the remaining work. In all, Northwest spent more than \$100 million on strike preparations; they are demanding \$176 million in concessions from AMFA.

"Keeping jobs is the biggest issue," explained MacFarlane. "They want to eliminate 2,000 jobs, and they want to be able to subcontract almost all of our work. If Northwest was offering a guarantee that our guys would have a future, we'd probably be able to find a middle ground."

The job cuts and outsourcing are part of a new business model that NWA wants to use, one that emulates low-cost, non-union airlines like JetBlue. Under this model, airlines outsource most of their aircraft maintenance to non-union contractors.

According to Yubian, "it's union busting 101. They want to make Northwest an open shop. If they force this on us, you can bet the rest of the airlines will follow."

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Despite AMFA's pre-strike calls for solidarity, neither the AFL-CIO nor Change to Win nor other independent unions at Northwest have committed to sympathy strikes or other support.

Questioned about AMFA's requests for support, AFL-CIO Organizing Director Stewart Acuff attacked the union shortly before the strike as a "renegade, raiding organization" and said AMFA and its more than 10,000 members are "not in the house of labor."

The Machinists union, which represents gate agents and other ground crew workers at Northwest Air, holds a grudge against AMFA, which has gained most of its members by decertifying IAM units. Northwest mechanics and cleaners left the IAM for AMFA in 1997.

IAM Vice President Robert Roach has said that "IAM members will not be duped into standing with AMFA."

Members of the Professional Flight Attendants Association, the union that represents NWA flight attendants, voted down a sympathy strike. PFAA has stated that it will defend the right of individual workers to not cross, however.

Teamsters spokespeople stated that, "members are free to honor the picket lines, depending on individual locals'

contract language. We're respecting the Northwest workers, but this is not necessarily a show of support for AMFA.

"To our knowledge, none of our members have crossed the lines."

ANOTHER PATCO?

Schalk called the IAM's statements "very disturbing," saying that, "these labor leaders are acting like children. When workers are striking, you don't cross the lines. We shouldn't have to remind people about that."

Some IAM members have not only been crossing the lines, but also reportedly taking on AMFA members' work. "To cross a picket line is bad enough," said Yubian, "but crossing a picket line to do struck workâ€"you shouldn't even be in a union."

In an open letter of support for the strikers, Trent Willis, president of International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10 in San Francisco, made reference to labor's devastating defeat in the 1981 air traffic controllers strike.

"Have they learned nothing from the devastating defeat of the PATCO strike 24

years ago?" asked Willis. "In 1981, officers of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' union (PATCO) were hauled off to jail in handcuffs at the urging of President Reagan. Unions at airports crossed the PATCO picket lines...The tragic result: a union in a key transport industry was broken and all workers have suffered from that defeat since."

Unlike with PATCO, President George W. Bush has said he will not intervene at Northwest. A White House spokesperson stated they do not view the strike as presenting "a substantial disruption of interstate commerce."

BANKRUPTCY LOOMING

Northwest has stated repeatedly that if AMFA refuses concessions, bankruptcy may be unavoidable. However, it appears that, with or without concessions, NWAâ€"which has been running \$3.6 billion in operating losses since 2001â€"is headed for bankruptcy.

MacFarlane said that bankruptcy might not be the worst option. "We don't think a bankruptcy judge would be any worse than what Northwest is trying to push. In bankruptcy court, Northwest would have to prove that they need all these givebacks and, frankly, I'm not sure if they can do it."

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