

"We're willing to strike because we are sick of being walked on"

Northwest Airline flight attendants rally in Detroit

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More than 100 Northwest Airlines flight attendants and supporters staged a noontime rally at Detroit Metropolitan Airport Wednesday to press demands for better pay and benefits. The airline's 10,600 flight attendants, members of the Teamsters union, have been without a contract for two and a half years.

The workers, who recently voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, are some of the lowest paid in the US airline industry. In contrast Northwest, which enjoys a near monopoly on service to Detroit and Minneapolis, has recently been extremely profitable. Its success has been due in large part to concessions it extorted from employees in the early 1990s when the company faced financial difficulties. In the mid-90s profits boomed while the pay of flight attendants and other airline employees remained frozen.

Several high-level Detroit-area Teamsters officials addressed the noon rally. They gave the usual empty promises of solidarity. Several presented the recent car haulers settlement, which contained significant concessions to management, as a great victory and promised a good contract for the flight attendants. "He wants to do for you what he did for the car haulers," said one official, referring to Teamsters President James P. Hoffa.

The Teamsters are asking the National Mediation Board to declare an impasse, giving flight attendants the right to strike. Even if approval is given the union must wait an additional 30 days before it can legally call a walkout. Northwest pilots struck last summer, following nearly two years of negotiations.

Flight attendants at the rally appeared very determined to improve their miserably low pay. Some expressed naive hope in the new Teamsters

administration headed by Hoffa.

Most flight attendants spoken to by the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their readiness to strike if necessary. "I cannot afford not to strike, I am making nothing. What have I got to lose?" said Ben, a flight attendant, age 28, with a little over one year seniority. He told the *WSWS* he made just \$12,500 last year.

Doug, a reserve flight attendant, showed his pay stub. He netted \$8,200 for a year of work. That didn't include the deductions for pagers, uniforms and union dues. "I'm working full-time and paid part-time. NWA CEO John Dasburg makes \$16,000 an hour," he said.

"Times have never been better for Northwest," said Ben. They have made a profit for the last five years. We are the fourth ranked airline in size and the seventeenth ranked in pay. Most flight attendants qualify for public assistance. I know flight attendants that get food stamps. If you have a child there is no way to support yourself on what we make.

"It makes you mad when you have Northwest CEO John Dasburg making \$17 million with all his stock options and I work for \$12,500. We have the highest paid CEO in the airline industry and some of the lowest paid flight attendants."

A 30-year-old female flight attendant, hired three years ago, told the *WSWS*, "We have an A and B scale wage system, where for the first seven years you are paid far less than a more senior attendant, although you do the same work. I made \$16,200 last year and worked 355 days, including Christmas, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving and the other holidays.

"We're willing to strike because we are sick of being walked on. We go beyond the call of duty, but Northwest management hasn't given us a contract in

nearly three years.”

Low pay is not the only hardship facing flight attendants. The job requires long hours away from home. During travel flight attendants often have to share rooms, often under barrack-like conditions.

“I have an apartment here that I share with other flight attendants. It is not in the best neighborhood because cost is an issue. I have to get help from my family. That is the way it usually is for the first few years for flight attendants. We have to rely on outside help to survive,” said Ben.

A female coworker added, “It is not uncommon for flight attendants to live in commuter rooms. These are hotel rooms where up to 10 flight attendants live with only two beds. We double up in the beds and share the rent, paying about \$100 each. Just go to any Howard Johnson's or Days Inn around the airport and you will see swarms of flight attendants.”

She described the conditions under which flight attendants work, which resemble those of casual laborers. “I'm on reserve, which means I'm on call to replace flight attendants who call in sick. I have 11 days off and the other days I am at Northwest Airlines disposal. Any time they beep me I have to show up. If they make a mistake and a flight is canceled I don't get paid.

“Once we are on the plane, we don't get paid until the aircraft door is closed. We can help with luggage, serve drinks to passengers, but we are not paid. Then if the flight is delayed the first one hour we work for free.”

The recent crash landing of an American Airlines jet in Little Rock, Arkansas, in which nine people were killed, has once again raised the question of airline safety. Reports of the tragedy underscored the importance of the quick evacuation of passengers from the flaming aircraft in preventing more deaths. In case of an emergency flight attendants must be prepared to maintain order and ensure the safe exit of passengers under chaotic conditions. Northwest flight attendants noted that degrading pay and working conditions and lack of training undermined the safety of the traveling public.

“We see signs in fast food restaurants hiring for \$8 an hour. I don't even make \$8 an hour. If your life is on the line in an airplane emergency, is that only worth \$12,500 a year?” said Ben.

His coworker remarked, “We've lost a lot of routes to

Mesaba [a commuter airline bought by Northwest]. They lease lower paid employees to NWA and that is why I'm on reserve instead of working full-time. Management wants to reduce its overhead and make more profit. They don't care about the implications to the workers or even the safety of their planes.

“I speak to flight attendants from all over the world. We are worried about safety because management is leasing lower paid, untrained flight attendants to cut costs. We are safety professionals who are trained to get the passengers out of the plane in case of emergency. How can you give someone two or three weeks' training—just enough so that they can do a safety demo—and expect them to react confidently in the event of an emergency? We are much more than people who say, ‘Welcome aboard, here are your drinks, we'll be landing in 20 minutes.’”

She continued, “It should be embarrassing that the corporate CEO's have such little respect for the people who make them wealthy—the ground crews, pilots, reservation agents and flight attendants. The backbone of society is the working class, the blue-collar people who work to provide for their families, to put food on their tables, pay for their lights, air conditioning and make sure their kids go to a decent school.”



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