

The Northwest strike: the end of the AFL-CIO and the political lessons for the working class

Statement of the WSWs Editorial Board
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It is necessary to speak bluntly. The scabbing against striking Northwest mechanics by the other unions at the airline demonstrates that the American trade unions are dead as organizations of the working class and cannot be revived.

The backstabbing is being carried out by organizations representing all factions of the trade union movement—the AFL-CIO, the breakaway Change to Win coalition, independent unions. There is no section of the official labor movement that upholds the most elementary principles of working class solidarity.

Northwest is utilizing hundreds of strikebreakers, but the key to its success in continuing to fly is the refusal of the Air Line Pilots Association and the International Association of Machinists (AFL-CIO), as well as the Professional Flight Attendants Association (independent), to honor the picket lines of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), and the failure of the Teamsters (Change to Win) to halt deliveries to the union-busting airline.

As of this writing, there is no mention of the Northwest strike on the website of either the AFL-CIO or the Change to Win coalition. The *World Socialist Web Site* called the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union, the leading union in the Change to Win group, to ask for their response to Northwest's union-busting. Neither returned our calls.

This shameful spectacle occurs at an airline that in recent years has wiped out thousands of union jobs and imposed massive wage and benefits cuts, and unilaterally imposed a new contract on mechanics and airplane cleaners in AMFA destroying more than 50 percent of their remaining jobs and slashing wages by more than 30 percent.

Northwest has made no secret of its intention to carry out similar attacks against the rest of its workforce, and will use the auspices of a bankruptcy court, if necessary, to relieve itself of its \$3.6 billion pension obligation and impose across-the-board cuts in retirement pay.

Northwest's offensive against its workers is part of an industry-wide attack that has seen the destruction of pension plans at United Airlines and US Airways, and a broader corporate onslaught on jobs, wages, pensions and health benefits that has already spread to the auto industry and will rapidly embrace every other sector of the economy.

Backed by the government and the courts, corporate America aims to roll back every advance made by the American working class in more than a century of struggle. Nothing is off limits, including the legal eight hour day, restrictions on child labor and the most elementary health and safety protections.

Tragically, the working class has been left virtually defenseless by the impotence and treachery of its old organizations. The problem is not that workers are unwilling or unable to fight. The entire history of the American working class testifies to its enormous capacities for struggle and sacrifice. The problem is that the fundamental perspective upon which the trade unions are based is false and

reactionary.

One might say the American trade union movement has completed a perverse historical experiment, testing the possibility of constructing a labor movement on the basis of hostility to socialism and defense of the profit system. Today, fifty years after the founding of the AFL-CIO on the basis of Cold War anti-communism, history has rendered its unequivocal judgment: a resounding “no.”

It is necessary for workers to look reality in the face and draw the necessary conclusions. Nearly a quarter century after the AFL-CIO allowed Reagan to destroy the PATCO air traffic controllers' union and bar 12,000 union members from ever again working in the control towers, the labor bureaucracy has made collaboration in the destruction of jobs and working class living standards the cornerstone of its policy. It has all but abandoned the strike weapon, and joined instead with corporate management in a “partnership” aimed at preserving corporate profits and the union bureaucrats' bloated salaries by imposing ever more brutal levels of exploitation.

In the intervening period, the AFL-CIO has betrayed scores of strikes and engineered the defeat of dozens of battles against wage-cutting and union-busting. Many of these were in the airline industry, including Continental (1983), United and Pan American (1985-86) and Eastern (1989).

At every point, in keeping with the pro-capitalist policy of the trade unions, the interests of workers were sacrificed to meet the profit demands of the airlines. This has proven to be a vicious downward spiral leading to the destruction of all past gains won in decades of struggle.

The corporate/government attack was launched in earnest in the late 1970s, under the Democratic Carter administration, in the form of deregulation of the airline industry. Then-chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board, Alfred Kahn, spearheaded the removal of government controls over the air carriers. Kahn also served as an economic adviser to Carter. One of the most enthusiastic and prominent advocates of deregulation was the liberal Democrat, Senator Edward Kennedy.

The public was told that the workings of the capitalist “free market” were the key to an efficient, affordable, safe and comfortable air travel system. What has the unleashing of unfettered capitalism produced? After nearly three decades, there is ample basis for drawing a balance sheet.

Deregulation has brought the demise of one-time giant carriers such as Braniff, Pan American, Trans World Airlines and Eastern. For airline workers, it has been an unmitigated disaster. Tens of thousands of jobs have been destroyed, wages and benefits have been repeatedly slashed, working conditions have been gutted, speedup and overwork have become the norm. For the vast majority of the flying public, the “magic of the market” has turned air travel into a semi-human ordeal, with third-class cabins resembling cattle cars served by stressed and haggard attendants. Any form of rational organization of travel routes and fares has been replaced by a crazy-quilt network of hubs and arbitrary ticket prices that often have no relation to distance or travel time.

Safety has been subordinated to the naked drive for profit, and

unscrupulous asset-strippers and speculators such as Frank Lorenzo and Carl Icahn have risen to the heights of corporate power. The final act in the drama is unfolding today, as airline bosses reward themselves with astronomical salaries and perks while they break their contractual agreements with their employees, terminating pension plans with the approval of the government and the courts.

Once the shakeout of the industry has been completed, and air travel has fallen under the control of a handful of giant monopolies, ticket prices will be jacked up to unprecedented levels.

The record of deregulation is a testament to two central facts: (1) the incompatibility between, on the one hand, an economic system based on private ownership of the basic levers of economic life and the subordination of social needs to the accumulation of personal wealth, and, on the other hand, the interests and needs of the working class—the vast majority of the people; and (2) the impotence of trade unions that defend the framework of the profit system and uphold the corporate monopoly of political power exercised through the two-party system.

Three vital lessons

The first lesson that must be drawn from the debacle for workers so tragically expressed in the Northwest strike is the need for the working class to establish its political independence from the ruling elite through the construction of its own mass party.

The fight to defend jobs, wages, pensions and health care is not simply, or primarily, an economic struggle that can be successfully waged at the level of trade union action—even with the best of unions. It is above all a political struggle.

How can workers counter the brutal offensive of the corporations without their own political party when every institution of government openly functions as an arm of big business? Legal contracts are meaningless when big corporations can flout them with impunity, knowing they will be backed by the courts. The right to strike means little when companies routinely obtain court orders and injunctions restricting picketing to little more than a token gesture.

The policies of the Bush administration, Congress and both parties provide living proof of the basic proposition of socialist theory that the state is, in essence, an instrument for defending and promoting the essential interests of the economically dominant class in society. Without its own party, the working class is unable to advance its own policies—not only on economic questions, but on the life-and-death questions of war and peace and the vital issues of democratic rights.

On the most basic questions that affect the lives of working people, the Republicans and Democrats are joined in a united front of militarism and reaction. The war in Iraq, launched on the basis of lies and in violation of international law, is a bipartisan exercise in imperialist aggression, motivated not by concern for the security of ordinary Americans or democracy in the Middle East, but rather by the desire of the US financial oligarchy to gain control of the region's vast oil resources and further its drive for global domination.

The mantra for the invasion and occupation of Iraq—the “war against terrorism”—has served as the political cover for a massive escalation of the corporate offensive against the American working class. The 9/11 attacks—the subject of a flagrant government cover-up aimed at concealing evidence of government complicity in allowing them to occur—were seized on by the Bush administration and the corporate elite not only to justify wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but

also to ratchet up the assault on jobs, wages and democratic rights at home.

Every airline worker knows that 9/11 became the rationale for an attack on airline jobs and conditions that continues to this day. But the unions squander millions of dollars in union dues to elect the very politicians who have cynically used 9/11 to deepen the attacks on the working class.

The working class must build its own party to put forward its own solution to the social crisis—one that proceeds from the needs of working people, not the entrenched wealth and privileges of a tiny ruling elite.

The second lesson is the need for socialist policies. Only if it is based on the struggle for genuine democracy and social equality—i.e., socialism—can a new party represent the interests of the working class.

The roots of the social crisis and the attacks on the working class lie not in the psychology of individual bosses, but rather in the crisis of the capitalist system itself. That is why union-busting, wage-cutting and mass layoffs are international phenomena. In every part of the world, the capitalist ruling elite is driven to make the workers pay for the contradictions and crisis of its system.

In the airline industry, the only rational and constructive solution to the crisis is to place air travel on entirely new foundations. It must no longer be organized and run for the profit of corporate owners, big investors, Wall Street speculators and multi-millionaire executives. It must instead be placed under public ownership and run as a public utility, subject to the democratic control of airline workers, representatives of the flying public, and the working population as a whole. This is the only basis for insuring safe, efficient and affordable air travel, and securing the interests of airline workers.

The third lesson is the need to organize the struggles of airline workers on an international basis. At Northwest, as at the other airlines, American workers are being pitted against lower-paid workers in other countries, through the outsourcing of a growing number of services. The only effective answer to this is to coordinate all struggles against layoffs and cuts in wages and benefits across national borders.

Such an international strategy will facilitate the development, under public ownership and democratic workers' control, of the airline industry on a global basis. The contradiction between the intrinsically international character of air travel and the division of the industry along national lines is one of the most glaring expressions of the irrationality and anarchy of the capitalist profit system.

The working class is an international class, objectively united more directly than ever by the globalization of economic life. The program that corresponds to the interests of working people and the progressive development of man's productive forces is socialist internationalism. This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.

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The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* urge all airline workers to consider the issues raised by the debacle at Northwest and the socialist policies we advance to answer the crisis. We urge workers to read the WSWS and write in to our international web site at www.wsws.org to contribute their thoughts and raise their questions, so that the WSWS can become a forum to develop the struggle of airline workers in the US and around the world.

We call on airline workers who agree with the struggle to build a socialist party of the working class to join the Socialist Equality Party.