

# At Northwest Airlines, Flight Attendants Learn A Lesson In Business Unionism

by Kim Moody

On March 22, Northwest Airlines and the airline division of the Teamsters union reached a tentative agreement covering 6,500 flight attendants. The agreement, the first since Northwest Orient acquired Republic Air in August 1986, is being voted on by mail ballot. Results are expected at the end of April.

Under the agreement, former Republic flight attendants achieve wage parity with former Northwest employees. But the two-tier wage scale, which had paid new hires lower wages for their first five years is now extended to seven years. The company had been asking for eight years. B-scale employees (new hires) will receive a \$3,000 one-time bonus at the end of their fifth year.

In fact, the economic terms of the settlement differ little from those the company had threatened to impose unilaterally on April 1 if an agreement hadn't been reached. The sole difference is that the fifth year bonus for B-scale employees was increased from \$2,000 to \$3,000.

In economic terms the new contract represents no real progress for most of the flight attendants and a substantial loss for many.

## THE NAVY AND THE BLUE

Prior to the merger, flight attendants at the two airlines had different unions and different contracts.

Republic's 2,600 attendants, known as the Navy Team for the color of the Republic uniform, belonged to the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the largest AFL-CIO union of flight attendants.

Northwest's 3,800 blue-uniformed attendants were represented by the Teamsters.

Both the conduct and emphasis of bargaining was different for the Navy and Blue Teams, as they are still called. In the AFA, the Navy Team bargained through its own elected, rank and file bargaining committee. Teamster bargaining, on the other hand, was dominated by full-time officials, in particular by William Genoese, director of the Teamsters airline division.

The Navy Team had emphasized long-range benefits and conditions in their contracts. Thus the Navy book, as they call their old contract, contained important benefits not in the old Northwest Blue book.

For example, Navy medical benefits paid 90% of costs with no deduct-



ible, while the Blue book paid only 80% and included a deductible. The Navy book included a \$50,000 life insurance policy, compared to \$10,000 for the Blues. Navy attendants accrued vacation days at twice the rate of Blues and received greater compensation for working a tour that cut into vacation time. In general, Navy attendants had more scheduling flexibility. The old Navy book also contained a Labor Protective Provision giving seniority protection against furloughs.

In the fierce competition that followed the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, two-tier wage systems were accepted at both Northwest and Republic, as at many other airlines.

But unprofitable Republic demanded more. Following the example of Republic pilots, the AFA agreed to concessions amounting to 23% from 1981 through 1983. These were to be restored when the company became profitable again. No cuts were taken in benefits or conditions.

Thus, when the profitable Northwest bought Republic in 1986, the two groups of attendants had different wage scales and conditions.

The obvious bargaining strategy at the merged Northwest Airlines would have been to demand parity with Navy benefits and conditions as well as with Blue wages—bringing

both groups of attendants to the higher standards and providing the basis for a united front against the company. This was not to be.

## TEAMSTER TAKEOVER

In the 1986 representation election at the new Northwest the Teamsters had certain advantages. First, they had a three-to-two membership advantage at the merged airline. Second, they had not taken wage cuts as had the AFA. Thus, they could claim they had done a better economic job for their members.

At the same time, lack of any previous communication between the two groups of flight attendants meant that Blue attendants had little understanding of the better conditions in the Navy book—which were much harder to explain in campaign leaflets than simple wage figures. In fact, the Teamsters labelled the Navy attendants "prima donnas" because of their complex work rules.

## DELAYED DUES

To sweeten the pot for Navy attendants, the Teamsters agreed that no Republic employee would have to pay dues until the Teamsters signed their first contract with the merged airline.

The Teamsters won the November 1986 vote, 3,699 to 2,264.

(continued on page 10)