

PILOTS ACCUSE AMERICAN AIRLINES OF BEING DICTATORIAL: WE CANNOT NEGOTIATE WITH BULLIES, THEY SAY



The contentious labor dispute between American Airlines and its pilots took a turn for the worse this week, meaning that flight delays and cancellations are likely to continue. American Airlines parent company facing financial constraints had filed for bankruptcy protection last year and had managed to get an approval from a Bankruptcy court to revoke the pilots' earlier contract. The airline is desirous of reducing its pilot workforce by 20 percent. To address its financial problems the airline is also proposing to freeze or conclude the pilots' pension plan and as of now, have stopped contributing to it. This the pilots were not agreeable to and began to sabotage work by calling in sick and submitting maintenance work orders in abnormally high numbers, which disrupted the normal routine of the airline. Thousands of flights were delayed or cancelled. The slowdown has seen more than half of Americans flight delayed and upwards of 600 flights cancelled. The management asserts that the pilots are deliberately "delaying departures for unnecessary checks, increased and late-filed maintenance write-ups, increased block times due to slow taxiing, and circuitous routings." The airlines 10,000 pilots are represented by the Allied Pilots Association and the union refuted charges that they were involved in a pre-meditated work slowdown. The union leaders say that the airline decision has caused fear of reduction in pensions and increases in healthcare costs and outsourcing. Restarting negotiations suffered a major block when the union reacted strongly to, what they perceived as a threat, when the airline asked them to stop slowdown tactics or face legal injunction. In a letter to the union, Denise Lynn, a senior vice president for the airline wrote, "We do not want to pursue this legal remedy; however, with the operation continuing to suffer for more than a week now, we must take appropriate steps to protect the company and the many constituents who depend upon it." "I ask that you communicate immediately and unambiguously with your members that such work actions are unlawful and that any individuals engaging in such activities will be subject to both company and (union) discipline," Lynn wrote. She concluded by writing that if the union fails to comply with its legal duty the airline will be left with no alternative but to seek legal recourse. Pilots union spokesman Gregg Overman said that they were willing to restart negotiations but the letter proved to be a major deterrent. It was "like a bucket of ice water on the process." Another Union spokesperson Thomas Hoban said, "This kind of threat is not conducive to good-faith bargaining and will only further serve to enrage an already frustrated and angry pilot group." As of now there are no plans for new negotiations but the union leaders will meet on Tuesday to decide their next course of action. However, the union did post a message on its website asking pilots not to indulge in slowdown behavior. American spokesman Bruce Hicks denied suggestions that the slowdown had forced the airlines to act. He said that they were willing to find an amicable solution even before the delays and cancellations started. "Our desire to talk has nothing to do with the operational disruptions we're seeing," he said.