Delta Pilot Union Votes To Strike ‘If Necessary’ Amid Contract Negotiations

A union representing Delta Air Lines pilots voted Monday to authorize a strike — but if there is an actual strike, it wouldn’t take place for a while, Reuters reported.

Michael M. Santiago I Getty Images
Delta Air Lines pilots picketed about contract negotiations back in September.
“With over 96 percent of members participating, 99 percent of Delta pilots authorized union leaders to call a strike, if

necessary, to achieve a new contractual agreement with Delta Air Lines," the Air Line Pilots Association, (ALPA) which represents almost 15,000 Delta pilots, wrote in a statement.

Delta and ALPA began negotiations in 2019 for a new contract that governs labor conditions for the workers but put them aside due to the coronavirus. Less formal talks resumed in 2021, and government-mediated ones in 2022, according to the ALPA.

Typically, when unionized workers are working without a contract, their wages, benefits, and related issues are frozen. This means no raises, for example.

"The Delta pilots are working under pay rates, contractual provisions, and benefits negotiated in 2016," the release added.

Although the pilots voted to support a strike, because of laws in the U.S., there are a lot of steps before thousands of pilots could just walk off the job, the ALPA noted.

First, the National Mediation Board, a government agency that focuses on labor management in transportation industries, has to "decide that additional mediation efforts would not be productive and offer the parties an opportunity to arbitrate the contract dispute," per the press release.

Then, if the company or the union says no to arbitration, then there is a 30-day "cooling off" time, then, if either side still wants to, they can take things to the next level with what is called "self-help" in labor parlance. That means managers could prevent employees from working (a "lockout") or workers could strike.

Delta pilots have been a part of ALPA since 1934, the organization said in an email. Their most recent contract, which is an agreement on things like wages and benefits that is struck between a union and company management, was

formalized in 2016 and expired in 2019.

Airlines are facing an ongoing pilot shortage. And a travel surge has helped boost airline's fortunes. Delta reported record quarterly operating revenue in September of $12.8 billion, which was 3% higher than for the same quarter in 2019.

"In this environment, we expect December quarter revenue growth to accelerate versus 2019 with an operating margin of approximately 10 percent," Ed Bastian, Delta's CEO, said in the earnings release.

The company was pretty bullish on Monday's vote. "ALPA's stated purpose for the vote is simply to gain leverage in our pilot contract negotiations," a Delta spokesperson wrote via email.

"We are confident that the parties will reach an agreement that is fair and equitable, as we always have in past negotiations," they added.

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