

Mediator tells pilots, United to keep quiet

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The National Mediation Board has imposed an informal gag order on United Airlines' parent company and its pilots, who have been negotiating a joint contract since soon after United and Continental Airlines announced plans to merge in 2010.

The board, an independent federal agency created to assist the airline and railroad industries with labor-management relations, has been involved in negotiations between United Continental Holdings and the United and Continental chapters of the Air Line Pilots Association since February 2011.

United hasn't reached joint contracts with any of its unionized work groups since merging with Continental. Although the airlines have merged, their flight crews still work separately under different labor contracts.

In mid-May the pilots asked to be released from mediated negotiations and called for a strike vote. In June, they picketed United Continental Holdings' annual shareholder meeting in New York. At the time ALPA leaders also expressed strong hope they would reach a deal with the company by June 15.

But they left New York with only the gag order request from the Mediation Board and plans for the parties to attend individual "status conference" meetings with the board's chairman in Washington this week to figure out the next steps.

Honoring the board's request, neither ALPA nor United would comment Monday. The board itself also declined comment.

But Fred Abbott, United's senior vice president of flight operations, sent a letter to pilots on July 2 - posted to United's negotiations website - expressing hope that things would move forward after this week's meetings.

"I remain hopeful that following our status meeting with the National Mediation Board the week of July 9, we will be able to quickly return to the negotiating table to reach an agreement," Abbott wrote in the letter. "I am well aware that the negotiations to reach a joint collective bargaining agreement have been long and frustrating. While many pilots have moved up in longevity, status and/or larger aircraft over time, many have not received an increase in pay for over 10 years.

"This is unacceptable, and we need to get this fixed, and fixed promptly. I am also aware that your expectations were high that an agreement would be reached in June; we shared those expectations, and are just as disappointed as you. We will continue to work on ways to get to an agreement, and get it promptly."

Deal is close?

Jerry Glass, president of labor and employment law consulting firm F&H Solutions Group, said voluntary or court-imposed gag orders are rare but not unprecedented in labor negotiations. He and others suggested the public silence may indicate that a deal is close - or at least that negotiations have reached a critical stage.

"Obviously they're in an important stage of negotiation and the mediator wants to ensure that there are as few outside distractions as possible," Glass said.

"When communication blackouts go into effect, it's because the parties are serious about trying to reach an agreement and they want to focus their sole attention on negotiations and nothing else," said Glass, a former executive vice president and chief human resources officer for U.S. Airways.

'That final step'

"It might be a sign that they're down to the wire and it's a question of whether or not they could take that final step - or if they're going to do something that could ruin everything. And that's not what the NMB wants to see," said Gary Chaison, a labor studies professor at Clark University.

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