

Statesman.COM

Real Austin. Real News.

 Search Site Web

Web Search by YAHOO!

Updated: 9:24 p.m. Friday, March 25, 2011 | Posted: 9:23 p.m. Friday, March 25, 2011

American flight attendants' inability to strike could curb other talks

By Christopher Hinton

MARKETWATCH

NEW YORK — The federal government isn't allowing flight attendants at financially strapped American Airlines to walk the picket lines any time soon, and that could change the tone of labor negotiations across the industry, some experts said Friday.

The National Mediation Board, the federal agency that referees labor-management relations for airlines, has ignored a request made a year ago by the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, asking the federal government to release it from negotiations for a 30-day "cooling-off" period, which then allows for a strike.

For almost three years, American Airlines flight attendants have been in talks with management, seeking improved wages and benefits as well as more job security. But management has said it will not agree to a deal until the union allows it more scheduling flexibility for workers to increase productivity.

The National Mediation Board later said the carrier's fragile finances and the weakened national economy would weigh heavily on its decision, according to the union.

The board said it would not comment on any ongoing labor negotiation.

"The political reality is, to a large extent, defined by the state of the economy," Laura Glading, president of the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, said in a statement. "Consequently, it is clear to us that the White House will avoid any kind of disruption. And we cannot lose sight of the fact that the National Mediation Board answers to the White House."

It's a clear signal to any union, at American or elsewhere, that trying to win a contract that would result in an unsustainable outcome won't be supported by the government, said Jerry Glass, a labor expert at F&H; Consultants Group.

"If a union has a demand on the table that can be shown by management that it is unsustainable, that it would put the airline at financial jeopardy \u2026 you will remain in negotiations," he said.

"I think this will put people back at the table, and American will likely get the productivity changes it wants," said Bill Swelbar, an airline industry expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

American Airlines' parent, AMR Corp., is the only major carrier expected to post annual losses over the next two years, based on a survey of analysts by FactSet Research.

"While American Airlines' lagging performance is not our fault, it is clearly becoming our problem," Glading said.