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Airline workers want pay, benefits restored

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By Dan Reed, USA TODAY

U.S. airlines workers, who have gone through pay and benefit cuts, layoffs, bankruptcies and rising workloads in recent years, are looking to capitalize on the return to profits this year of most big U.S. carriers.

The push for better deals by workers, who've seen ranks thinned 25% since 2000, is creating an increasingly tense relations climate in the industry. "Labor is going to want to walk away with something. They have to," says consultant Michael Boyd of Boyd Group International, whose clients have included airline unions. "Airline labor has been on hold for the last seven years."

Currently on the table:

- Votes were being counted late Tuesday on whether mechanics and related workers at American Airlines will take a deal that's short of their goals but would end three years of talks — or authorize a strike.
- American's three years of talks with flight attendants, ramp workers and pilots are nearing a decision point this fall.
- Delta flight attendants and ground workers are gearing up for union representation elections this fall. Those had been non-union jobs at Delta, but former Northwest Airlines workers, who came with the 2008 merger, were strong unionists who want the top world carrier fully union.
- US Airways recently asked a federal judge to break the legal stalemate between former America West pilots and those of the old US Airways. America West bought US Airways in 2005 and took its name. The dispute about which union will represent them has stalled full integration of the two operations. At stake is union seniority, which governs pay and assignments.
- The proposed merger of United and Continental can't close until their unions and the government approve. Mindful of US Airways' problems, the companies are urging their unions to reach accords now, which has given unions leverage to trade for not gumming up the merger.

But the labor militancy does not mean that strikes are inevitable, says Jerry Glass, principal at F&H Solutions Group, which advises airlines on labor talks.

"The trend is going to be, at least for the short term, more angst for both employees and management. But I think, long term, things will start to settle down. That will probably occur after American finishes its round (of talks) and after United and Continental complete their merger" and get new labor contracts.

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