



NORWEGIAN AIR SAYS IT BACKS UNIONS

News / Airlines



Both Norwegian Air Shuttle and the Association of Flight Attendants say they back the right of the carrier's U.S. based flight attendants to vote for union representation.

The Norwegian airline and the largest flight attendant union don't agree on much else.

AFA says anti-union Norwegian opposed the right of its U.S.-based flight attendants to be represented by a union, the Norwegian Cabin Crew Association. AFA attorneys worked to help NCCA make its case to the National Mediation Board.

Norwegian says it favors unions but prefers a "European model" where a third party, not the airline, hires flight attendants. In contesting the unionization of its U.S. flight attendants, Norwegian argued that the group works not for the airline but rather for a subsidiary staffing company, OSM Aviation.

The NMB rejected that argument and scheduled a representation election. On Friday, the board said that of 149 eligible Norwegian Air flight attendants, based in Fort Lauderdale and New York, 69 voted for representation and 38 voted against.

While the number of flight attendants eligible to vote was small, Norwegian has said it will have more than 500 U.S.-based flight attendants by the end of the year. That will be the largest U.S. flight attendant base for any foreign airline.

“The case was very significant, not just for flight attendants but for all aviation workers,” said AFA President Sara Nelson. “Norwegian tried to say that it is not the employer of their flight attendants.”

Had the NMB ruled that flight attendants don’t work directly for the airline, that would have meant the flight attendants are not covered by the Railway Labor Act, which enables airline workers to unionize under NMB procedures.

“Norwegian’s whole business scheme is about avoiding labor unions and undercutting labor standards,” Nelson says. “Their claim about not being against unions is hilarious. It doesn’t hold water.”

Norwegian says it backs labor unions and most of its 5,500 worldwide employees are union members.

As for the U.S. employees, “The airline fully supported the crewmembers’ right to vote for who they believed would be their best representation,” said Norwegian spokesman Anders Lindstrom.

Lindstrom said Norwegian’s intent was to have the same employment structure it has in Europe. “In Sweden and the UK, for instance, the cabin crew unions work with the recruitment company or a partner,” he said.

“It is paramount to understand the difference between American and European low-cost operations,” he said. “Norwegian simply wanted for it to be the same. This should not under any circumstances be distorted to say Norwegian is anti-union.”

He said OSM Aviation flight attendants “receive industry-leading international per diem rate and excess pay; health insurance with no deductible and numerous other benefits.”

Norwegian Air’s US crew pay scale shows hourly rates of \$27.16 in the first year and \$33.34 for the fourth year, the most senior level at the U.S. base. At American, which has one of the best flight attendant contracts, hourly pay is \$26.16 in the first year and \$32.65 in the fourth.

The representation battle is just one front in the conflict over whether which Norwegian Air Shuttle subsidiary should be allowed to fly to the U.S. – Norway-based Norwegian Long Haul or Ireland-based Norwegian Air International.



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