FRONTIER FLIGHT ATTENDANTS PROTEST CUTS TO SICK-LEAVE POLICY

News / Airlines

The union representing Frontier Airlines flight attendants is crying foul over attendance policy changes that it says penalizes employees -- and threatens their jobs -- for calling in sick.

"Changes to the dependability program should be addressed at the negotiating table, not simply imposed upon the workers it impacts," Association of Flight Attendants-CWA national spokeswoman Molly Sheerer said. "(Has Frontier) taken steps to improve the health and well-being of the flight attendants? Is there adequate rest? Nourishing crew meals? An affordable and good health plan? Time off to go to the doctor? A clean workplace? A healthy workplace where sick employees are encouraged to stay home to prevent others from becoming ill?"

AFA-CWA will picket Frontier's corporate headquarters near Denver International Airport at 11:00 a.m. Tuesday.

At the center of the union's protest are changes to how absences are counted.

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Flight attendants are assigned work by trips, each of which includes a series of flights over several days. The previous policy, the union says, would count missing one trip as one absence - called an "instance."

Flight attendants were allowed eight instances per year under the previous policy, according to the union.

The new policy, however, hits a flight attendant with 1.5 "points" for each day he or she is out sick, according to a memo obtained by The Denver Post that was dated Sep. 22 that Frontier sent to all flight attendants.

According to the new policy outlined in the memo, accruing eight points leads to termination. The union says this effectively prohibits flight attendants from calling in sick for a four-day trip for fear of losing their job.

"Each instance now has increased value and the point of termination is now lowered, which is a double whammy for flight attendants," Sheerer said. "If flight attendants call out less than 4 hours in advance, we get double points."

Points are also assigned in heavier weights for other infractions, the union says. According to the memo, four points are given if a flight attendant doesn't show up or misses a trip; three points if they're late and cause a flight delay; and 2.5 points if they call off work "late," or are tardy, among other violations.

The airline also states in the memo that it has the "simple expectation" of perfect attendance, "unless the absence is truly unavoidable."

Frontier spokesman Jim Faulkner pointed out the system now works on a rolling six-month timeframe: If the flight attendant has six months perfect attendance, two points come off the tally. The previous policy deducted a half point after three months of perfect attendance.

"The primary change is our focus on on-time performance," Faulkner added. "In order to achieve those goals, we need people to show up and be at work on time."

Frontier's on-time performance focus has shown results in recent months: In August, the latest statistics available from the U.S. Department of Transportation, 77.1 percent of Frontier's flights arrived on time - up from 71.4 percent in July and 67.6 percent in June.

But Sheerer says the airline must acknowledge that the flight attendant job -- with shifts that average 12-14 hours per day up to 6 days in a row -- can't simply be placed under a blanket policy in order to meet on-time goals.

"Management likes to compare flight attendant sick leave use to other employees. These other employees are able to go to work with a broken thumb, twisted ankle or a cold," Sheerer said. "These other employees sleep in their own beds, are able to eat healthy meals at normal meal times, work an eight-hour day and don't come into contact with hundreds of people per day."

During the company's leaner years, many employees took pay cuts and gave up vacation time in order to keep the airline afloat, AFA-CWA local president Angie Pillar said - a fact that has many flight attendants questioning why further cuts are necessary at a time Frontier enjoys record profits.

"We gave concessions to save the company, and now we're being asked to give more," Pillar said.

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"Frontier is the world's fifth most-profitable airline ... we just want to get back what we believe we deserve."

14 OCTOBER 2015

SOURCE: WCARN
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https://ids.50skyshades.com/news/airlines/frontier-flight-attendants-protest-cuts-to-sick-leave-policy

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