

US Senate ends feuding over pension negotiators

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Reuters) - The U.S. Senate ended weeks of bickering over how many members of each party could participate in talks with the House on pension legislation, after a former Republican leader proposed a compromise and Democrats cried: "Deal!"

The agreed ratio of nine Republicans and seven Democrats was announced Friday afternoon by a tired-looking Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, who earlier in the day had lamented that feuding senators were acting like schoolchildren.

"This is getting old and it's almost childish," Frist said.

But the subject of pensions is serious for U.S. companies. Last November, the Senate approved a bill that would strengthen traditional corporate pensions and shore up a deficit-ridden pension insurance agency. The Senate package also included special help for distressed airlines.

The House passed its version of the bill in December. But negotiations over a merged version were delayed while Senate leaders argued over the size of the negotiating committee.

Frist originally proposed seven Republicans and five Democrats, but Democrats demanded to add one more of their number, so that there would be eight Republican senators and six Democrats.

Frist refused, and the behind-the-scenes argument spilled out onto the Senate floor this week, where Frist and Minority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, sniped at each other about it every day.

At one point Reid accused Frist of deliberately stalling to "stack the deck in favor of downtown interests," referring to lobbyists' offices in central Washington, D.C.

Earlier this week the head of the Senate Finance Committee, Iowa Republican Charles Grassley, said that if the argument were not resolved soon he would pull the airline relief provisions out and tack them onto a tax bill, effectively killing the pension legislation.

On Friday, former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott came to the Senate floor to try to patch things up.

"If we don't get to conference on pensions, there's going to be a plague on both our houses," Lott warned. "There's at least one airline that has bet the whole company, frankly their survival, in bankruptcy on us getting pension reform done," the Mississippi

Republican said.

Lott did not name the airline, but bankrupt Delta Air Lines Inc. (DALRQ.PK: Quote, Profile, Research) and Northwest Airlines Corp. (NWACQ.PK: Quote, Profile, Research) have been lobbying for months to get special pension aid.

"I have a novel idea," Lott offered. "Go up to 9-7 or go down to 6-4" for the committee's composition.

"I'll take it," Reid snapped. "Nine-seven and you've got a deal."