

Judge: Comair can impose pay cuts

But more talks set between Delta unit, flight attendants

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A lingering labor battle at Delta Air Lines subsidiary Comair intensified Friday when the regional carrier's bankruptcy judge ruled it can void its flight attendant contract and impose pay and benefit concessions.

Flight attendants have threatened to strike if Comair moved to impose terms — but both airline and union officials say the two sides plan to meet for more talks next week.

"We don't view today's ruling as a victory," Kate Marx, a Comair spokeswoman said Friday. "We prefer a consensual agreement."

Her counterpart at the Teamsters union, which represents Comair attendants, agreed.

"We're disappointed with the judge's ruling, but we're going back to the bargaining table with the company next week," said Noa Oren, a spokeswoman for the Teamsters, told Bloomberg News. "They haven't moved to implement this. It doesn't significantly alter our position."

The issue essentially mirrors the down-to-the-wire talks earlier this year between Delta and its main pilot union, which threatened to strike if the airline succeeded in getting their contract voided during bankruptcy proceedings. A settlement prevented a walkout in that case.

At Comair, Delta negotiated cost-cutting deals with pilots and mechanics to aid in its restructuring, contingent on also getting cuts from flight attendants. But Comair hasn't been able to seal a deal with the attendants, prompting the airline to ask the judge to let it void the contract if talks don't produce agreement.

Comair provides Delta Connection service primarily in and out of Delta's Cincinnati hub, though it also has 48 daily flights at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. Delta bought the Cincinnati-based, regional jet pioneer in 2000. Both filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy court protection last year.

Comair's 970 flight attendants are paid between \$16,000 and \$40,000 a year, and the airline had sought \$7.9 million in labor savings. The union estimated that would amount to an 11 percent pay cut as well as work rule concessions.

Judge Adlai Hardin, in White Plains, N.Y., faulted Comair flight attendants for refusing a June 14 contract proposal that would have eliminated \$1 million in annual cuts.

"The Comair flight attendants could have continued to enjoy by far the highest pay rates and the most favorable work rules in the regional airline industry," he wrote. "(Comair) has demonstrated beyond doubt that a material reduction in Comair's flight attendant costs is essential to the company's ability to be successful in the extraordinarily competitive regional airline market of today.

Comair has 6,400 employees and operates 850 daily flights to 108 cities.