

Pilots hopeful for deal at Delta

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(By John Crawley)

WASHINGTON, Dec 6 (Reuters) - The union for pilots at bankrupt Delta Air Lines sees no sign yet management will make a deal on concessions but notes the carrier has always found a way to settle its differences, the labor group's top national official said on Tuesday.

"I would like to think we can do it at Delta," Duane Woerth, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, told the Reuters Aerospace and Defense Summit in Washington.

But Woerth said both sides are in unfamiliar territory with the airline trying to overhaul its business in bankruptcy and the pilots threatening to strike if the court imposes a new contract.

"They're not used to playing hard ball. Management is not used to doing it and the pilots aren't used to having to put up with it," Woerth said.

He said the two sides have always worked out their problems even when previous contract talks grew contentious.

Delta has sought court permission to void the contract of its only labor union to save money and restructure. But New York bankruptcy Judge Prudence Beatty pressed the two sides last week to reach a negotiated settlement.

Delta wants to force its pilots union to accept \$325 million in givebacks, part of \$3 billion in cost cuts and revenue increases it says it needs to restructure.

Delta contends a strike would be illegal.

A spokesman for Delta, Anthony Black, said no talks with the pilots are scheduled and the company's concession figure has not changed.

"We continue to remain firm," Black said.

Black said the lines of communication remain open, however. "We continue to work for a mutual agreement," he said.

The pilots have offered their own concession proposal and question whether management's prescription is necessary with fuel prices moving lower this fall.

Delta pilots have threatened to strike if the airline forces a new contract with less pay and new work rules. Delta's mainline unit has never experienced a strike and Woerth said any job action by pilots would mean a "100 percent shutdown."

Unions at US Airways and United Airlines that threatened to strike during attempts by those carriers to void contracts during bankruptcy eventually reached last-minute giveback deals.

Woerth said any agreement, which would be negotiated by the representatives for Delta's 6,000 pilots, would probably come at the end of court proceedings on the company's motion to throw out the contract.

"It's hugely tense at Delta. Both sides are in strange territory. They're used to working things out," he said.