

Delta pilots begin strike vote

March 06, 2006 04:32 PM ET

Reuters

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - The pilots' union at bankrupt Delta Air Lines Inc. on Monday said it had begun polling members on a strike as the two sides head into arbitration this month over a new contract.

The vote to authorize a strike is the latest move in a series of steps that the union must take before striking. The union has asked its parent, Air Line Pilots Association, for a \$10 million contingency fund and has set up a strike center in Atlanta.

The No. 3 U.S. carrier and its pilots have been negotiating a new contract but failed to reach an agreement on concessions by a March 1 deadline, triggering arbitration on the airline's bid to reject the labor group's contract.

The union has said that it would strike if its contract was rejected.

A Delta spokesman said that arbitration did not preclude negotiations and that the airline was committed to reaching a consensual agreement with pilots.

"We believe an agreement can be reached," said spokesman Bruce Hicks. "A strike by the pilots would be fatal to Delta," Hicks said.

Delta is seeking more than \$300 million in savings from its pilots, the airline's only major unionized work force, as part of \$3 billion in cost savings and revenue increases it has said it must achieve to survive.

The union, which agreed to a previous round of pay cuts to help Delta avoid an earlier brush with bankruptcy, has argued that the airline's demands are excessive.

The two sides struck a deal in December to have the contract issue decided by a three-person arbitration panel if they failed to negotiate an agreement. Two of the panel's members have been chosen by the union and one by the airline.

The arbitration hearings are scheduled to take place in Washington beginning March 13, with a ruling due by April 15.

Northwest Airlines Corp. , which filed for bankruptcy protection on the same day as Delta, reached tentative deals with its pilots' and flight attendants' unions last week after a similar standoff.