

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN KERRY  
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION  
AVIATION LABOR ISSUES  
APRIL 25, 2001

I'd like to thank all of our panel for being here this morning. This hearing occurs at a sensitive moment in the aviation industry. Passenger and freight transportation is projected to grow dramatically over the next decade. The airlines are, albeit slowly and sporadically, improving customer service. And an unusual number of labor contracts have become amendable this year. It is important for the airline industry to recognize the importance of maintaining a workforce with high morale so that it can effectively manage increased passenger loads and improve service. Morale is improved by making employees feel appreciated. And making employees feel appreciated means paying them appropriate wages and providing important benefits.

We must proceed with some caution today. I know that some employees and their airlines have come to tentative renegotiations agreements. But I think every one of us in this room would do well to remember that these agreements have not yet been ratified by the full unions, and also to remember that there are still two major airlines that could face labor-management problems this summer.

It is my hope that we can go through this discussion this morning in a manner that doesn't unduly influence any union member or company executive and cause them to back away from their tentative agreements. I don't think it's appropriate for the Congress to throw itself into the collective bargaining process at this moment, and I hope that we can steer clear of doing that this morning.

As we discuss this sensitive issue today, we need to remember that the right to bargain collectively is one that organized labor earned over a long period of struggle. Today, it is one of the most fundamental rights of workers in this country. The collective bargaining process is sometimes confrontational, but it ultimately gets results for working people. That's not anything we can jeopardize, and with many airlines and unions currently working through the collective bargaining process, it's also not anything we in Washington should disrupt with inflamed rhetoric.

I hope we also remember this morning that the people who make the airplanes run have unique technical and safety skills. However, they are far from highly compensated. We need to keep in the back of our minds that a senior level mechanic at Northwest only makes an average of about \$55,000 per year. The average flight attendant – industry wide – makes about \$33,000 per year. Yes, pilots, who are regularly entrusted with the lives of hundreds of people at 30,000 feet, make more. But the bottom line is that these folks have the same interests as the passengers at heart: They simply want the airplane to reach its destination as safely and quickly as possible.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.