

Striking Against Progress?

The pilots' strike against American Airlines, the nation's largest domestic carrier, is important, because it goes close to the heart of air progress.

Starting last November, American put new DC-7's into the first nonstop service between New York and California. This was a substantial advance over previous service involving a stop at either Chicago or Dallas. American scheduled the westbound flight at seven hours, 55 minutes, and the eastbound at seven hours, 15 minutes.

A CAA check of flight records last spring showed, however, that in a one-month period not a single westbound flight had been completed within eight hours.

Up to then all domestic lines operated under rules fixing an eight-hour limit on pilots' scheduled flying. American sought waiver of this ruling and CAB granted it temporarily, setting a new 10-hour limit.

The Airline Pilots' association had filed a complaint which led to the CAA time check. It continued to be dissatisfied after the waiver and American's revised schedules adding 30 minutes to the westbound trip and 20 to the eastbound. The union has supplied the initiative for the present strike against scheduled DC-7 operations.

The association founds its protest on the issue of safety. It argues that pilots who are compelled to be at the controls more than eight hours are not fit to cope with the flying problems that might arise.

However, comparison with the overseas operations of international carriers like Pan American casts some doubt on the reasonableness of this argument.

Pan Am is allowed to fly DC-6's (predecessor to the DC-7) on overwater flights ranging from eight to 12 hours; nonstop, with two pilots and a flight engineer—the same crew American Airlines employes on the disputed New York-California run.

The captain and copilot share duty at the controls according to their own wishes, though both must remain in the cockpit continuously.

There is no indication this arrangement is any kind of safety risk. American's coast-to-coast flight is closely comparable, but would seem, if anything, to be safer. For overland flights in this country have greater navigational aids and regular or emergency airports constantly within reach.

On flights exceeding 12 hours Pan American or any other U.S. international carrier is required to use multiple crews, consisting of a captain, a first officer with identical qualifications, a second officer who can fly but is mostly navigator and another copilot and two flight engineers. Thus any one of four men may be at the controls.

In practice the captain sets up a "flight watch" at the preflight briefing to parcel out the flying work, weighing weather and other conditions. But nothing in government regulations sets a top limit on the time he or any other man may fly the aircraft.

The safety argument against the DC-7 nonstop service appears thin. What the union really seems to fear is that many more concessions might follow from abandonment of the outmoded eight-hour rule—which was set in a day when pilots might have to make several lands and take-offs in that span.

They merit reassurance on this score. But the kind of progress DC-7 nonstop service represents should not be impeded by dubious raising of the safety issue.