

# Midwest, Union Talks Collapse

By **SUSAN CAREY**

Negotiations between Midwest Express Airlines and the Association of Flight Attendants union broke down early Friday, freeing the 450 attendants at the Milwaukee-based carrier to legally strike. The two sides failed to bridge differences over pay.

But the union didn't stage a mass walkout. The AFA favors a strategy of selectively striking individual flights without warning to the airline or its customers. It calls the strategy Chaos, or Create Havoc Around Our System, and used it successfully several years ago in a job action against Alaska Airlines. As of yesterday, no Midwest Express flights had been disrupted.

Midwest Express, a unit of Midwest Express Holdings Inc., late last week filed suit in U.S. District Court in Milwaukee, asking the judge to rule that attendants who participate in such intermittent walkouts could be disciplined or fired. The union has 20 days to respond to the complaint.

Carol Skornicka, senior vice president and general counsel of the holding firm, said the company plans to "lock out" any attendants who do participate in Chaos

strikes for the duration of the labor conflict, so they won't be paid. Ms. Skornicka also said the carrier has trained about 50 management employees in flight-attendant duties. They could step in if a few attendants walked off a flight just before it departed, leaving it with fewer than the necessary number of attendants.

A spokesman said the union hasn't responded to the suit. But he said prior judicial rulings in the Alaska Airlines case puts precedent on the side of the attendants at Midwest Express.

The attendants voted in the union as their bargaining representative in May 1999. They have been trying to negotiate a first contract since then. The two sides have failed to reach agreement on compensation. The airline said it can't meet the union's demands because of the poor state of the industry and its own losses. The AFA wants an immediate 9.5% raise and subsequent raises of 3% to 5% a year for three years.

Last October, Midwest Express froze all employee compensation in the wake of the terrorist attacks. It expects to lift the freeze this October. Midwest Express attendants currently earn starting pay of \$17,700 a year, with top pay rising to \$36,600 annually for a 16-year veteran. The carrier serves 26 cities with 34 jets.