Northwest Airlines said Wednesday that it is prepared to use replacement mechanics "for an indefinite period of time," suggesting that it's willing to endure a long strike.

Meanwhile, the national director of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) agreed with that assessment in an interview with the Star Tribune.

Also Wednesday, mechanics union leaders in the Twin Cities raised concerns about the issuing of security badges for replacement workers.

Since the dispute began late Friday night, Northwest has deployed about 1,200 replacement mechanics, outside vendors and 350 salaried Northwest employees to maintain the carrier's fleet.

AMFA had about 4,400 mechanics, cleaners and custodians when union leaders called the strike.

"The use of contract technicians is allowing Northwest to approach the annual $176 million labor savings target we had established for AMFA," Northwest spokesman Bill Mellon said Wednesday.

Mellon did not specify how much replacement workers are being paid per hour, and he declined to estimate the cost of housing the replacement workers at local hotels. But he said the total cost that Northwest is paying to companies for replacement workers is allowing Northwest to save on its maintenance costs.

At this time, the replacement workers are not employees of Northwest.

O.V. Delle-Femine, AMFA's national director, told the Star Tribune on Wednesday: Airline officials "are paying a tremendous amount of money for labor that really cannot produce the product."

Delle-Femine said Northwest's comments about the quality of its replacement workers is "all hype on their part."

However, he acknowledged Wednesday that many of his members are preparing for a long strike.

"Quite frankly, they don't give a damn," he said. "They feel it can go two months, three months, a year. They
don't care. The way they've been treated by this company, there's a tremendous amount of disdain."

Delle-Femine maintains that Northwest's proposals at the bargaining table were designed to "force us out on strike."

Four years ago, AMFA had more than 9,700 members at Northwest. That had fallen to about 4,400 during the final week of contract negotiations last week.

Northwest proposed guarantees for 2,750 technicians, but AMFA contract coordinator Jeff Mathews said the protection extended only to the individuals now in those jobs, not the positions themselves.

Northwest also proposed cutting the pay of top-scale mechanics from $36.14 per hour to $27.17. That's a drop from $75,171 in annual pay for the most experienced mechanics to $56,513.

Delle-Femine said he's hearing from many AMFA members that they believe they are going to lose their jobs.

"It's a toss-up," he said, whether AMFA members will get their jobs back at some point. "As far as we know we are not [getting them back], unless the company says they want to go back to the table," he said. "But I doubt that right now."

No talks have been scheduled.

"No one in management wanted a strike," Northwest CEO Doug Steenland said late Monday in a message to Northwest employees. "We're aware of the hardship that a strike causes on our AMFA-represented employees."

But, Steenland stressed, with fuel prices remaining at record-high levels, that management could not reduce its $176 million cost savings goal with AMFA. If the airline's management had agreed to a smaller concessionary package with the mechanics union, it would have required other labor groups to assume a bigger share of the $1.1 billion in cuts that the company wants, Steenland said.

He flatly denied accusations that Northwest was engaged in union busting, pointing out that three labor union leaders sit on Northwest's board of directors.

But Delle-Femine said Northwest's actions are simply a pretext to a Chapter 11 filing. "It's the excuse they are going to use to file for bankruptcy to get rid of the pension plan," he said.

Northwest said its operations were hurt in the initial days of the strike because of "an AMFA slowdown during the days leading up to the [strike] deadline on Friday." But AMFA leaders have pointed out that many AMFA members were told to leave work early on Friday.

Delle-Femine predicted that Northwest's operations will worsen and that passengers should expect more delays. "We'll see in 10 days, and we'll check on the flight schedules," he said.

Clearing security

Striking Northwest mechanics and cleaners, as well as flight attendants, raised concerns Wednesday over some replacement workers who do not have security-clearance badges that are usually needed to work at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

Ted Ludwig, AMFA Local 33 president, said his members have learned that for every 10 or 12 replacement
cleaners, perhaps one has a badge.

Knowing who is servicing planes is of particular concern these days, Ludwig said, because airport security has been heightened nationwide since the 9/11 attacks.

The lack of badges is not a problem, said Northwest spokesman Kurt Ebenhoch, because the workers involved have already passed FBI background checks and are escorted while on airport property.

Replacement mechanics, in all or nearly all cases, already have their badges, according to the Metropolitan Airports Commission. "It's just an issue with the cleaners," Ebenhoch said. "The background checks on all of them have been completed," and most have their badges already.

Northwest is working with the commission and the Transportation Security Administration to get the rest of the badges for those who still need them.

The security process includes fingerprinting new employees and doing 10-year background checks, said Pat Hogan, spokesman for the Metropolitan Airports Commission. "They're checked against a federal list for any kind of criminal history or any other red flags," Hogan said.

He said Northwest appears to be following the rules.

"The way the federal security regulations read," Hogan said, "people either have to have a badge to work in this area, or they have to be escorted by somebody who does have a badge."

Ebenhoch said the cleaners are employed by a third-party vendor, Globe Aviation Services Corp., which is based in Irving, Texas.

On Wednesday, Northwest shares closed down 6.7 percent, or 37 cents, at $5.16. It marked the second consecutive trading day the stock has lost value. The airline's shares have given back all the gains they registered on Monday, the first trading day after the strike began.

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**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO

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