

FREQUENT FLIER STRIKES BACK AT UNITED OVER PERKS

(Crain's) — It was only a matter of time before passengers' frustration with United Airlines' **changes in frequent-flier rules** spilled over from the blogosphere to the courthouse.

The changes that pushed Daniel Banakus, a 20-year United customer from California, from aggravation to legal action involved extra legroom and free baggage check. Chicago attorney Joseph Siprut filed suit Wednesday in U.S. District Court on behalf of Mr. Banakus, claiming that United breached contracts with members of its Mileage Plus frequent-flier program when it combined United and Continental systems and changed the rules in March.

The airline previously offered benefits such as free automatic upgrades to Economy Plus seats with extra legroom to customers who had achieved Premier status, flying 25,000 miles or more. United also cut its free baggage check to one bag from two, according to the suit.

The suit contends that the Economy Plus upgrades, previously available at the time of booking, now would be awarded at the time of check-in, making it less likely that frequent fliers would get the award without paying extra for it.

It may sound like peanuts. But for frequent fliers such as Mr. Banakus, they're perks worth fighting for. Airlines see them as profit centers, often the difference between making money and losing it when fuel prices are headed north and demand is heading south. Carriers are becoming more stingy, lavishing the best perks only on their most lucrative customers. Premier is the lowest level of road-warrior status.

Nonetheless, Mr. Siprut estimates that it costs about \$6,800 for a customer to accumulate 25,000 miles. And, he says, the benefits earned with miles flown in the previous year can't be changed in midyear.

United declined to comment.

Mr. Siprut is seeking class-action status to include all Mileage Plus members. It's not his first time tangling with an airline. He has sued Southwest Airlines for not redeeming outstanding drink tickets.