Pinnacle

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Pilots Hope 2012 Builds On Success Of 2011

Capt. Tom Wychor (far left), MEC chairman, and Capt. Paul Hallin (third from right), Negotiating Committee chairman, address a recent ground school class.

The fast-paced negotiations that joined Pinnacle, Mesaba, and Colgan pilots through a joint collective bargaining agreement in 2010 resulted in the pilots’ overwhelmingly ratifying the agreement in early 2011. “One Contract | One List | One Voice” was the 2010 slogan that propelled the Pinnacle-Mesaba-Colgan Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) through negotiations to achieve an industry-leading tentative agreement just five months after Pinnacle bought Mesaba in July 2010.

That same energy carried over into 2011 when votes were cast by nearly 87 percent of the eligible Pinnacle, Mesaba, and Colgan pilots, and 90.5 percent of those pilots voted in favor of the agreement. The move paved the way for integrating one of the world’s largest regional airlines.

With a solid contract in place, the JNC went to work implementing the new agreement at the three companies. To enhance pilot-management cooperation, the pilot leaders actively engaged in various alternative dispute resolution procedures with management personnel and achieved a high degree of success. Virtually all of the pre-JCBA outstanding contract grievances were resolved at Mesaba and Pinnacle by the fall—a significant achievement considering Pinnacle had well in excess of 300 outstanding grievances.

ALPA placed pilots who were well educated on the new agreement in the System Operations Control Center of each airline to help train schedulers on the new contract and to prevent contract violations from occurring. This initiative was so well received that management agreed to pay half of the flight pay loss of the pilots involved. The pilots participated in scheduler training and helped to build an important bridge with each airline’s scheduling personnel.

As the contract was implemented, each of the airline’s Merger Committees worked to integrate the pilot seniority lists into one, a challenging feat with two carriers, but even more daunting when three pilot groups are involved.

The three premerger groups agreed to a process that did not include using attorneys, saving the pilots the significant expense associated with merger costs through an assessment. Arbitrator Richard Bloch issued his ruling in June, and the integrated seniority list was implemented in July.

Beginning in fall, the newly formed Pinnacle Master Executive Council (MEC) elected new officers: Capt. Tom Wychor, chairman; Capt. Jonathan Allen, vice chairman; Capt. Matt Green, treasurer; and F/O Zohrab Grigorian, secretary. At the first combined MEC meeting in October, the new leaders began harmonizing the committee structure, adopted a new policy manual, discussed ways to unify the nearly 3,000 pilots as the integrated seniority list was implemented, coordinated officer crew room visits, and scheduled a special MEC meeting in December to work with Association staff to develop a comprehensive strategic plan.

“Our combined MEC is working through our differences in a cooperative manner,” says Wychor. “Merging seniority lists is never easy, and integrating three pilot groups, with three separate cultures, could have been a difficult process had it not been for the desire of all parties involved to make this transition as seamless as possible.”

The pilots continued to work with management as the transition progressed. They successfully negotiated an additional $250,000 in annual company-funded ALPA flight pay loss (for a total of $350,000 annually) as part of a package that reduced the company’s overall training burden until early summer 2012.

In early December, the MEC learned that Pinnacle was facing financial challenges. As of press time, management has asked the pilots for a 5 percent wage reduction and for additional training relief.

While the news was unexpected, the pilot leaders quickly rallied to mobilize all available resources to address the problem. “Based on our ability to work together during the last year,” Wychor says, “we’re confident that we will capably and constructively work through any upcoming challenges.”

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