Pilots Battling To Save Safety Culture; Working Toward JCBA

By C. David Kelly, ALPA Senior Communications Specialist

A United B-747 in the new corporate livery.

The pilots of United Airlines have been battling United’s management over the past several months on two fronts—inadequate training associated with attaining a single operating certificate (SOC) and negotiating an industry-leading joint collective bargaining agreement (JCBA).

On the safety and training front, the pilots continue to stand up and voice strong concern to United’s management and to the highest levels of the FAA regarding the company’s inadequate training associated with United’s SOC. ALPA was founded on safety 80 years ago. Today, safety remains its bedrock.

“Securing a joint collective bargaining agreement with the company is a major priority for this pilot group,” says Capt. Wendy Morse, the pilots’ Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. “But equally important is preserving the industry-leading safety culture, which is sacred to each and every United pilot, and requires commensurate training. United pilots earned a reputation worldwide as being among the safest in the airline industry. And that reputation wasn’t earned by chance. Many of the procedures and practices airlines and the FAA adopted were the result of the work, dedication, and professionalism of United and other airline pilots throughout the industry.”

Morse and the United MEC are concerned that the new management executives at United Airlines, many of whom came over from Continental and emanated from People Express, fail to recognize and comprehend the contributions United pilots have made to the training and safety culture at the airline over the years.

“Through the years, ALPA has been an essential part of the safety and training culture at United Airlines, integrally working alongside management to develop and implement safety rules and procedures,” notes Morse, whose term as chairman of the United MEC ended on Dec. 31, 2011. “Since the announced merger with Continental Airlines and the installation of new management, ALPA’s voice in the training and safety arena has not been recognized as in the past and over our long history, at the risk of reducing the safety level for which United Airlines is known. It is not that melding two safety cultures is the problem, but training is crucial in that effort.”

The United pilots, upon the request of members of Congress, on November 10, issued a white paper on the inadequate training and compromised safety procedures by United Airlines within the process of its merger with Continental.

“This is a battle that we have an obligation to engage in. It’s a fight United pilots will always join when we see United management compromising safety for expediency,” Morse says.

On the negotiating front, the United pilots also continue to work with their Continental brethren trying to secure a JCBA with the company. Talks have been ongoing since August 2010, with little progress made in any key issue areas.

For nearly eight years, the United pilots have been flying under a contract hammered out during the airline’s bankruptcy, and their patience is growing thin regarding management’s delays to negotiate a contract that acknowledges their contributions. Negotiations, which are under the supervision of the National Mediation Board, are at best moving at a snail’s pace with more than nine months spent gridlocked on work rules with major sections such as retirement, benefits, compensation, and scope only being minimally discussed.

Capt. Jay Heppner, who began his new duties as the pilots’ MEC chairman on Jan. 1, 2012, is well acquainted with the JCBA issues, having served as the MEC’s Negotiating Committee chairman the past two years. His focus is on securing a JCBA that will usher in a new day for pilots at United.

“The goals of a collective bargaining agreement are in place, and the United and Continental MECs have unanimously validated those goals and objectives,” says Heppner. “It is our intent to secure a contract for our pilots, a contract that will be viewed as the best in the industry. Our pilots have earned it, and they should not be expected to settle for anything less.”