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or the pilots of AirTran Airways, May 1, 2009, was the start of a new year and a new beginning. In the same manner that one would shout “Happy New Year” each January 1, the pilots of AirTran Airways resoundingly exclaimed, “We Are ALPA” on May 1, 2009. Formerly represented by an independent union, the National Pilots Association (NPA), the 1,631 pilots of AirTran Airways have joined together as brothers and sisters in the Air Line Pilots Association while continuing the fight for better work rules, fair wages, and most importantly, quality of life.

After contract negotiations lasting 4 years, and negotiations seemingly at a halt, merger discussions between ALPA and the NPA began in January 2009. A merger agreement was sent out for ratification in March 2009, and on April 10, 2009, the vote closed, with more than 87 percent of the pilots who cast ballots voting in favor of ratifying the proposed merger agreement between ALPA and the NPA. The determination of the AirTran pilots to negotiate a fair contract and improved working conditions led to the campaign to join ALPA. That same determination will result in a new contract in 2010.

“The 88 percent vote in favor of the merger is almost as impressive as the fact that 94 percent of the pilots voted,” said Capt. John Prater, ALPA’s president, while addressing ALPA’s Executive Council and welcoming the then NPA Board of Directors. “It speaks volumes about your members and their commitment to a brighter future.”

Awarded a $5 million grant from ALPA’s Major Contingency Fund for strategic planning and strike preparedness, AirTran pilots ramped up their efforts and conducted five informational picketing events in less than one year. On August 6, they conducted informational picketing to commemorate 5 years of contract negotiations on a contract that became amendable in May 2005.

Additional ALPA resources have allowed AirTran union leaders to significantly diminish an immense backlog of grievances that has accumulated over the years—one of the key reasons, along with collective bargaining resources, that the pilots sought alternate union representation. They have been able to secure an increased number of negotiating dates and have enhanced communications among the group while working toward a new collective bargaining agreement.

In a Thanksgiving message to the pilots, F/O Linden Hillman, the Master Executive Council chairman, said, “We should be thankful that AirTran is strong, and hope that our corporate officers will finally recognize that they should fight for their company and not against their employees.” He added, “We should also be thankful that our hard work has helped make AirTran the successful enterprise it has become.”

The pilots’ Negotiating Committee, with guidance from the MEC, continues to work on garnering an industry-standard contract equal to that of those flying similar-sized aircraft at other major airlines. Not only has AirTran management set up obstacles along the way, it has tried to limit the pilots’ support of their union. Yet, AirTran pilots have united and proved to management that they can transcend any obstacles, including layoffs, displacements, firings, suspensions, and threatened discipline for displaying the ALPA logo on their person while in uniform.

Despite the dismal economy, AirTran remained profitable in 2009, making some of the highest quarterly profits in the company’s history, and the airline is expected to be even more successful in 2010.

In late 2006, Barack Obama said, “We have to acknowledge the progress we made, but understand that we still have a long way to go. That things are better, but still not good enough.” That could easily describe AirTran under ALPA. Things are better and improving every day.