

# STRENGTH IN UNITY

## Airline Pilots Securing Their Future Through ALPA

### Northwest and Champion Pilots Show True Strength in Unity

Early in August, Northwest Airlines and its mechanics union, the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association, were in what appeared to be a standoff, with AMFA poised to strike on August 20. Northwest management was trying to get its ducks in a row for that eventuality, not knowing how other unions on the property would react, including whether ALPA would call a sympathy strike by its pilots. So Northwest management got busy with some contingency plans.

Champion Air is a charter airline based in Bloomington, Minn., and ALPA pilots fly its airplanes. Capt. Matt Marsh is Master Executive Council chairman for the Champion pilots, and he begins this story. "The first word we got was from our management team at Champion, informing us that Northwest management had approached Champion about doing some flying both before and after the potential strike," he says. "Northwest had a significant number of airplanes on the ground because of mechanical problems and wanted to use lift from Champion." In other words, Northwest management was considering using Champion airplanes and pilots to cover some routes.

"We informed our management that we wanted to talk to [Northwest MEC chairman] Capt. Mark McClain and [ALPA's president] Capt. Duane Woerth before doing that," Capt. Marsh says. The Champion MEC suite is right down the hall from the Northwest MEC suite in a Minneapolis office building, "so we can just walk down the hall to talk to each other," he says. "Within a few hours, we had talked to Mark McClain, and his immediate read on [the proposal] was that it was a violation of their contract."

Jody Bettenburg, ALPA's senior contract administrator who drew up the grievance, says that Northwest management's action was a clear violation of the Northwest/ALPA Pilot Agreement's Section 1 on Scope and Successorship. Most ALPA contracts have sections on this subject. That section provides for expedited arbitration when such a grievance is filed.

"We called our vice-president of operations and told him we might have a problem and asked if he would sit down with Mark and me to talk about what they had in mind," Capt. Marsh remembers. "A few hours later, we got a call from the vice-president, pulling out of the meeting. He said that Northwest management had inadvertently forgotten to inform their MEC of their plans, and

they wanted to do that in a separate meeting with the MEC. I gathered that Northwest management didn't ask the pilots for relief from the contract at that time."

First Officer Hal Myers, Northwest MEC Communications Committee chairman, picks up the thread of the story. "We approached management about it, and they said, 'Oh, yeah, we forgot to tell you.' We told them it was against our contract, but they kept pursuing it."

"A week later," Capt. Marsh continues, "we got a call from our chief pilot, who said that Northwest manage-

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ment was going to use us for a trip the following day, from Detroit to Dallas. I told Mark about this."

That day, F/O Myers says, "we told [Northwest CEO] Doug Steenland that we would file a grievance if he used the Champion pilots. The next morning, management flew the flight anyway."

That was August 10. On that day, Capt. McClain sent an e-mail message to the Northwest pilots, describing the situation and informing them that he had just signed the grievance and expected it to be in Steenland's hands by day's end.

"The Northwest/ALPA pilot agreement requires all revenue flying conducted by or for Northwest or any affiliate to be performed by Northwest seniority-list pilots," Capt. McClain wrote. "The agreement also prohibits the subcontracting of flying to others. ALPA believes management's use of Champion Airlines to perform Northwest flying constitutes a blatant and serious violation of the agreement."

Capt. McClain says, "The flight took place at 10 a.m., and we had filed the grievance by 2 p.m. That evening, I received a call from Tim Rainey, senior vice-president of flight operations, saying that Northwest management would 'cease and desist' the flying. Within 12 hours, we had gotten through to them that this was unacceptable behavior, and by that night, no other flights were planned."


When Capt. McClain sent his e-mail message out to the pilots, he was careful to point out that Champion pi-

lots were not the bad guys in this conflict. He told his pilots that the Champion pilots had informed him about the plan in the first place, and continued, "Some Northwest pilots have suggested that Champion pilots should refuse to accept any assignment to perform Northwest flying," he said. "However, Champion pilots have no legal basis to refuse such assignments. Like Northwest pilots, Champion pilots may be subject to disciplinary action if they refuse an FAR-legal assignment. We cannot, and do not, expect them to put themselves individually at risk by taking such action on our behalf.

"I urge all of you to remember that our dispute here is with Northwest management, not with the pilots of Champion Airlines.... Any treatment of Champion pilots that reflects otherwise is unwarranted and inappropriate."

## Continental MEC Calls In

As AMFA strike preparations heated up, the Continental pilots' MEC chairman, Capt. Jay Panarello, also got in touch with the Northwest MEC chairman, Capt. Mark McClain, and the Continental CEO in a gesture of solidarity. Capt. Panarello's report to Continental pilots read in part: "Most of you are keenly aware of the developments at Northwest Airlines and the potential scenarios that exist [if] the AMFA-represented mechanics elect to seek self-help.... Yesterday, I placed a call to Capt. Mark McClain, the Northwest MEC chairman, and Mark gave me an update on the situation. As you probably have read, and to keep pressure on both parties, the Northwest MEC has not indicated publicly whether Northwest pilots will continue to work if there is an AMFA work stoppage. Since we don't know yet what the decision of the Northwest MEC will be, I offered the general support of the Continental pilots.

"After discussing the situation with Mark, I placed a call to [Continental CEO] Larry Kellner and discussed the situation with him. I made clear that Continental pilots would not want to see our company take steps that would harm Northwest pilots. I'm pleased to say that Larry understood the concerns being expressed and agreed that we would continue to discuss and evaluate events as they unfolded. Moreover, and as a matter of respect for the relationship with our union, Mr. Kellner reiterated his desire to work with us to ensure that our interests are accommodated." 

The message went out by e-mail, website, and telephone hotlines. And the word was disseminated far beyond the union. Because AMFA was in the news, and because Northwest ALPA pilots have an excellent rapport with the press in Minneapolis and Detroit, says Northwest MEC communications specialist Will Holman, the pilots' grievance and Capt. McClain's caution about their attitude toward Champion pilots were publicized from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* to the Associated Press and outward to points from Grand Forks, N. Dak., to CBS News and *USA Today*.

Capt. Marsh says the communication blitz was invaluable to the Champion pilots, and it reflected the solidarity between the two pilot groups. "This is the type of cooperation that has been fostered by an extremely good relationship within the Northwest-Mesaba-Pinnacle-Champion family," he says. "We would never consider flying Northwest trips without informing the Northwest MEC first. And once we had the discussion, we felt extremely comfortable that this was now a fight between the Northwest pilots and management, not between the Northwest and Champion pilots.

"Ultimately, what is important is how the pilots perceive the situation," Capt. Marsh notes. "If Northwest pilots saw a Champion plane pulling up to the gate, it could really have caused some problems. In the end, we had very few situations in which Northwest pilots confronted Champion pilots, and because of the communications, those situations were minimized."

Another form of cooperation was a weekly meeting of the four airlines' MEC chairmen (in person and by conference call) to discuss the possible ramifications of the mechanics' strike for all of them. For example, AMFA represents the mechanics at Mesaba, which could have presented some fallout.

But what about interunion unity? Why did a pilot sympathy strike to support the mechanics not materialize? Ironically, it was for other "strength in unity" reasons, in the wake of the pilots' hefty pay concessions in December 2004 to keep Northwest afloat.

"Crossing another union's picket line is obviously distasteful to us," F/O Myers says. "But we've been trying for two years to get the other Northwest unions to join with us in creating a solution to Northwest's cost problems. If we had joined in a sympathy strike, Northwest management very likely would have grounded operations and filed for Chapter 11 immediately. And we still think that, if we can get through these tough times, Northwest can avoid Chapter 11, but only through a joint solution. A sympathy strike would have closed the door on that."

—Susan Burke, *Publications Specialist*