



Theater of The Absurd

By Capt. Dennis Dolan, ALPA First Vice-President



We have all seen the phenomenon of low-cost carriers over the past several years. They have brought to the airline industry increased competition, lower fares, lower yields, and in some markets, degradation of service. This is not an issue just in the United States. For some time, similar cutthroat competition has been going on in Europe, and it is now appearing in Asia.

Much of the time, such competition is healthy. Even though pilots who fly for carriers that have survived mergers, economic downturns, wars, and deregulation may not like the “new” business model, it is likely here to stay.

Among the low-cost carriers, however, one stands out from all the rest—Ireland’s Ryanair. Yes, it has low fares, but at what costs? Even in a service-intensive industry, Ryanair passenger complaints are virtually ignored. The customer is not always right, which some less-reputable business people might believe is a pretty good slogan. With Ryanair, the passenger is presumed wrong and will be challenged in court if necessary to prove the point. And for passenger comfort, the new Ryanair airplanes will come with non-reclining seats and have no window shades. Passengers already have to pay to check bags and for any food and beverage service on the flight. All of this is done in the interests of saving costs and maximizing profits for a few and gives new meaning to the concept of “no frills.”

From the employee’s side, Ryanair also stands out. The employees are expected to pay for everything they need to meet their job requirements—their uniforms, their training, their water—and I would not be surprised to hear Ryanair’s CEO say at some point, “The pilots have to pay to fly

my airplanes.” One of his latest rules is that employees may be dismissed if they are caught charging their mobile phones on company property using company electricity. He has been charged with personally bullying and pushing his employees around, as well as summarily dismissing them for the most minor infractions.

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As a pilot, try to imagine yourself being treated this way and pushed to maintain on-time performance. What does such treatment do to pilot morale and to CRM in the cockpit, as well as to how the day-to-day operations function? A future article that the president of the Irish ALPA will prepare for *Air Line Pilot* will outline the pilots’ perspective of Ryanair management.

So, why is Ryanair’s CEO doing this? For money—plain and simple. But airline profits are not the real issue from our perspective. The real problem is that Ryanair’s CEO is taking advantage of the current labyrinth of rules in Europe to establish a precedent about how multinational companies of the future might look and operate. Employers from anywhere, with no regard for local social and labor issues, can obtain an air operating certificate in one country—in his case, Ireland—and base employees in other countries—in his case, England and others. He hires employees from all over Europe—looking for the cheapest labor market. In doing so, he takes advantage of different rules in a number of countries and blurs the issue of who is

controlling the company and what controls apply—particularly when it comes to social and labor issues.

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structure might fall under the labor laws and jurisdiction of Liberia. Your paycheck may come in whatever currency the company can use to turn a profit. Your uniform may reflect the social customs of South America, and the aircraft livery may be in whatever colors the airline alliance chooses today. Your fellow pilot on the first leg of your trip (captain or first officer) could be from India, and then on the next leg from Brazil. Don’t even ask about flight manuals—they will have to be electronic because no one can carry around that much paper.

The answer to the Ryanairs of the world is to reject this model in every available forum as unhealthy for the airline industry from a safety, labor, and social perspective. Our carriers cannot possibly compete successfully against such ruthless cost cutting tactics and the flaunting of loosely structured rules to hide behind. Obviously, we have our work cut out for us along these lines, but rest assured that we are paying very close attention to this unacceptable “new” business model to prevent it from happening here and taking root around the world. 🌐