

# Your Union: Built for All-Weather Flying

By Susan Burke, Publications Specialist

**T**he Air Line Pilots Association was ALPA's name from the beginning, but it was conceived as, and remains, more than an association. It is a union, grounded in the fundamental principles of trade unionism: that workers will take action when faced with injustice; that they deserve a safe working environment and fair wages; that their triumphs will benefit everyone, not only themselves; and that these goals can be achieved primarily through resolve, perseverance, and, above all, unity.

ALPA's president, Capt. Duane Woerth, reminded the Executive Board at its June 2006 meeting that 75 years ago "Capt. Dave Behncke and a small handful of his fellow airmen ... concluded that flying airplanes for a living would never be worthwhile—unless they took action. With collective commitment to definable common goals, with genuine cooperation across company lines, they formed this union."

## Workers unite

U.S. trade unions took hold in the 19th century when the rapid expansion of the economy led to great disparities in wealth. As the rich became the super-rich, the swelling ranks of immigrant and native-born workers eager to keep their jobs were beaten down. Facing this widening gap, the working class banded together to fight for a living wage, workplace safety, an end to child labor, a more reasonable work week, and many other benefits that spread to the wider society. Factory workers and meat packers and railroad employees and garment workers—the "blue collar"—hoisted that banner, and in 1931, Capt. Behncke and his crew followed in their footsteps. And while pilots are considered "white collar"—"a highly educated workforce, professional people with a very independent spirit, people used to making decisions," as ALPA's general counsel Robert Savelson describes them—"the organization has succeeded because underneath that, it adheres to basic principles of the democratic trade union movement," he says.

Jonathan Cohen, director of ALPA's Legal Department, harks back to 1985, when United pilots were battling CEO Richard Ferris and his B-scale: "When you worked with Delta pilots, it seemed they thought of ALPA as an association," he says. "When you worked with United pilots, it was clear they knew ALPA was a labor union. As pilot groups one after another have gotten in trouble, they have turned to ALPA as a union, not an association. The Delta pilots ran into trouble at the end of the 1990s. Now their leaders are as solid as anyone in viewing ALPA as a trade union."



**Capt. Robert Kehs (Northwest) addresses the 2000 ALPA Board of Directors after receiving the first David Behncke Lifetime Achievement Award for "devotion to the Association, its member, and trade unionism."**

In 2000, Capt. Robert Kehs (Northwest) received the first David Behncke Lifetime Achievement Award, created "in special recognition of ALPA members who have made an extraordinary contribution to preserve and perpetuate trade unionism as embraced by the Air Line Pilots Association." In presenting the Award, Capt. Woerth commented that Capt. Kehs "wasn't just a Northwest pilot, he was truly a trade unionist who worked for anyone's project.... I started my career at Braniff Airlines,

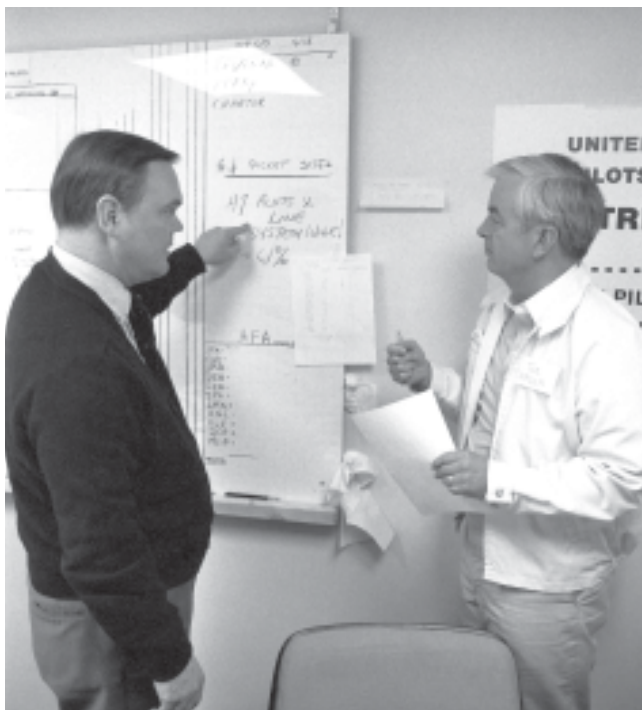
where I belonged to a union, but I didn't become a trade unionist till I came under the wing of Capt. Bob Kehs."

And Capt. Woerth is just the latest on the list of presidential trade unionists. "How," muses Don Skiados, Communications Department director and a 35-year ALPA veteran, "did the ALPA Board of Directors have the absolutely blind luck or incredible intuition to elect ALPA presidents who are trade unionists at the very core—Randy Babbitt [1991–98] used to sit around the kitchen table with his father down in Coral Gables, Fla., while they were having a union meeting. J.J. O'Donnell [1971–82] declared, 'We are a trade labor movement. When we forget that, we start getting dumped on.'"

"And Hank Duffy [1983–90], who everybody said was 'a teetotaler, a Republican country club guy—he's not a trade unionist.' But it was Hank Duffy who went to support the mineworkers in West Virginia and got locked up. He was a dyed-in-the-wool trade unionist. In 1985, Richard Ferris [United Airlines CEO] told Hank Duffy, in his office, in front of his staff, 'I will break your union.' That's when Duffy decided he would devote all the resources he had to fight Ferris."

## Going the limit

For his part, Capt. Kehs, in accepting the Behncke Award for his work in numerous ALPA strikes, said, "I've never felt that organizing and implementing a peaceful and lawful withdrawal of pilot services after satisfying the Railway Labor Act is anything less than noble."



**Clockwise from above: AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland marches with United pilots and families during the 1985 strike; Chicago reporter Jim Tilmon interviews Capt. John LeRoy in the Strike Center; the MEC chairman, Capt. Roger Hall, flanked by then-F/O Chuck Pierce (left) and Capt. Jim Engleman, tells the pilots' story; and Capts. LeRoy (left) and Dave Landry plan the telephone tree for picketing sites.**



A strike is the ultimate expression of unity, and the most dramatic, because it is the last resort. Before taking such a drastic measure, the union organizes, proposes, negotiates, projects the face of unity as a warning and a sign of strength. At any stage of the struggle, success rarely comes easily and sometimes it is long delayed.

The Continental strike of 1983, for example—the opening battle with Frank Lorenzo—was a painful strike, Skiados says. “We didn’t prepare for it properly, but from that, we learned a lot about how to handle a strike. That and the United strike of 1985 were the instigators behind the brilliant idea to institute the Major Contingency Fund [MCF]. When you have \$90 million in reserve for such purposes, it’s like having a nuclear arsenal.”

Seth Rosen, who was director of ALPA’s Representation Department at the time, describes 1985 as a “crossroads for ALPA, when it created the MCF. Seeing the need to deal with a regulated environment, they increased their dues and fought for their rights, and came out standing.”



were lagging behind the other major airlines in pay and benefits, and they figured it was a way to get to the next level,” Cohen said.

Capt. Kehs was an old hand at handling strikes at Northwest by 1983, when he went to Houston to work with the Continental strike committee. He’d been on hand for strikes at Northwest since 1960, and was strike coordinator in 1972 and again in 1975, when the pilots went on strike three times in 2 weeks over pension issues, and again in 1978.

“The theory of striking is not breaking legs or killing people,” he said in a telephone interview from his retirement home in Mexico. “It’s only convincing people that they can do what they have to do.”

After Continental, he and Capt. Rick Dubinsky, who became strike chairman for United in 1985, worked on an SOS-preparation committee for ALPA’s then-president, Capt. Hank Duffy, and then Capt. Kehs was asked to help the United strike effort. One of his main contributions, he said, was to “convince them they couldn’t do a slowdown. If you prepare for a strike, you prepare for a strike, and if you’re on a slowdown, pretty soon you get an injunction saying you’ve got to disband. We avoided that particular poison.”

## Bringing the family along

Just before the strike, caused by a fight over the B-scale that American Airlines had and United wanted, one of the most important, most unifying, innovations in ALPA strike preparation took place. “The Family Awareness idea came from a fellow named Walt McNamara,” Capt. Kehs said. “We had a

Lorenzo used scabs to break the 1983 Continental strike, then withdrew recognition of ALPA as the pilot union. A reorganizing attempt in 1993 failed over seniority issues, but finally, in 2001, the Continental pilots voted to rejoin ALPA. “The pilots were willing to come back to ALPA because they

meeting with the core strike committee. There was a lot of discussion about families, because if the wife says, 'You can't go on strike,' there are a lot of guys who would go to work. There had been some at Continental.

"There's no excuse for scabbing, period, and we wanted to take that excuse away from them. Rather than let anybody say, 'My wife made me do it or I'd end up with a divorce,' Walt came up with the idea of Family Awareness to educate the families as to what the situation is, and it worked terrifically well."

Capt. Dave Koch led the communications effort along with Skiados and his staff, and together they instituted teleconferencing to inform pilots—live—as events happened. It was another new way to keep the group united.

"It was a very tense time," said Capt. Ed Miller, who managed the strike office and made the announcement that United was closing down. "People were living paycheck to paycheck. But the leaders did a very good job of bringing us together. Meetings were held on the local level to bolster us. We had teleconferences, pulling us together. And we had a plan: This is what we'll do if it all goes down the drain. I was looking into getting a trucking job. It was a matter of always having an alternative, which is the success of all aviation. That's what lets you take care of your family, and your airplane."

Ferris was training 570 pilots to fly as strikebreakers, but Capt. Jamie Lindsay went to Denver to talk to them and stayed for months. When the union struck, almost every one of them stood up and walked out with ALPA. "The whole effort was important," Capt. Kehs said, "but Jamie's work was bragging rights."

The strike lasted about a month, and United pilots went back to work without a permanent B-scale. Capt. Kehs said the magic formula for their success was that "everybody was behind it."

Times are different now, with different challenges, he said. "This is a bad time for the whole airline industry. How do pilots of the future keep what they have? There has to be a way for



**Capt. J.C. Lawson (left), Comair MEC chairman, announces to Comair pilots on March 27, 2001, "We are on strike." Delta pilots (above) picket for their comrades, and 89 days later, Comair families gather to celebrate their victory.**





capitalists to account for employees as part of the corporation. It's hard to believe they are not as important as the stockholders. I feel sorry for the kids who are fighting the battles now, but there's only one way to fight them, and that's together."

### 'Not one airplane flew'

Sixteen years later, in the spring of 2001, a longer strike—89 days—at a smaller airline—Comair—succeeded in backing management down from an unacceptable position.

That strike's leader was Capt. J.C. Lawson, Comair MEC chairman, who started out as a Presbyterian youth minister, then went into business, and finally followed his longtime desire to be an airline pilot. "All three of those jobs prepared me to do ALPA work," he said in a phone interview. All of them, he noted, were aimed at helping people and filling their needs, which as MEC chairman he is called to do.

Trade unionism, he says, will remain alive and prosper if everybody is driving toward the same goal. Comair pilots' goal in 1998 was to get their work rules for the regional airline in line with those of the larger carriers.

"We made very clear to our pilots," he said, "that our focus was never to strike the airline, but we felt our requests were in line with what the airline could produce. And if a work stoppage was required, we would take them there. We let the pilots know they had a voice in this thing, that it was going to take their involvement in a very intimate way to make this happen."

About two years into negotiations, Delta purchased Comair, so now ALPA was essentially negotiating with Delta. "That certainly changed things somewhat," Capt. Lawson said, "but it changed our position absolutely zero. They indicated to us that they had deep pockets and could withstand a long work stoppage, and that we could be crushed. And we decided to take them on."

"I think they believed that in a few short days the pilots would cave and meet their demands, but after 30 days, there was even a second wave of steadfastness among the pilots. And all the while, not one airplane flew."

Lawson credits the pilots and families who were running the Pilot-to-Pilot and the Family Awareness programs with keeping up morale: "They were absolutely committed, they were focused, they had a singleness of purpose. They even provided diapers for babies, and babysitting for parents who had to be out working at a part-time job."

"The other beautiful thing that helped to keep things moving along was ALPA. ALPA was there with family gatherings funded by the MCF, family meetings, family dinners, family fun days when kids could come and enjoy themselves."

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*—Capt. J.C. Lawson, Comair MEC chairman, during the strike of 2001*

### Nerves of steel

And it took courage on everyone's part, he said, "because we were determined to walk away from our cockpits and not look back if this could not be achieved. After the threat that our management put to us on March 26, our message to our pilots was, 'We're not looking back. If they can't go there, we're willing to move on to something else.' The alternative was not going back, it was something other than 'Well, we tried, but ...'"

"And we knew the airline could do what we were asking."

Carol Alverson, secretary in the Comair MEC office, remembers those months vividly. "I was awed that people who hadn't worked together before could put together this huge office and were running it like pros in no time. It was a stunning show of unity," she said by telephone.

"The Family Help Fund was run through the main MEC office. The money came in from all over, even people who had no connection with the airline, but they were union people. I remember a grocery worker sent us a check. The unions at UPS and American gave large contributions. People would fill out a form, and the money would be distributed by a committee—for instance, to a woman who needed very expensive medicine for a chronic condition, and without insurance, it was unaffordable."

"I cried every night," she said. "My husband's a pilot, and if they shut down the airline, that would be two jobs lost. It was a scary time. But this is the important thing. Not a single threat came true—the airplanes came back, the routes came back, the pilots came back. Not one thing that management threatened came true."

As everyone in the airline industry knows, however, there's no rest for the weary: "What's happened in the last five years is certainly more than a footnote," Capt. Lawson said. "Now it's a different game. We're trying to hold on to what we've got. Our management has come to us for givebacks, and they absolutely threatened our pilots after the bankruptcy filing at

**“I fought to get my ALPA pin from 1994 to 2003, all the way. I was brought up with an understanding of trade unionism and the protection it provides.”**

**—First Officer John Keller (Kitty Hawk)**

Delta, trying to force something down our throats. Certainly the end has not been written yet.

“Going forward, we have our work cut out for us again. Trade unionism works when things are going up—when you’re bettering your contract—but it still works when things are going the other way—in a bankruptcy situation, for example—but it works differently. Your job is never the same.”

Reflecting more broadly on trade unionism, Capt. Lawson said it is not just one pilot group deciding to be trade unionist. “It is the association of all pilots,” he said. “Solidarity is mainly about one internal ALPA pilot group. Trade unionism is pilot groups of two airlines or three airlines or four or five or six airlines that work under a certain brand deciding that when this particular mainline management talks to one airline’s pilot group, it’s talking to all of them.”

## Expanding the future

Capt. Lawson, who is an ALPA executive vice-president, said that after concentrating on preserving the Association in the face of the massive revenue reductions of the past few years, ALPA is now going to reach out to bring the non-ALPA pilot groups into the Association.

That goal reflects a conviction that Seth Rosen voiced: “The lifeblood of a union is organizing,” he said. “ALPA has organized a huge number of pilot groups in the last 20 years. Whether they worked for cargo companies, small-jet or big companies, every size and shape and form, recognizing that airlines come and go, ALPA has gone after them.”

One of the smaller groups that joined ALPA recently is Kitty Hawk Aircargo, which has 134 pilot members. Kitty Hawk First Officer John Keller is a vocal advocate of trade unions, and he echoes Rosen’s thoughts: “In trade unionism, no airline is too small,” he said in a phone interview. “Every pilot, no matter what he’s doing, needs to belong to ALPA. ‘Us versus them’ in the pilot community needs to go away.

“When I’m president of ALPA,” he said with his tongue only lightly planted in his cheek, “I’d like to see every last pilot with a commercial certificate be a member of ALPA, like the physicians did with the American Medical Association.”

F/O Keller’s father flew for American back when it was an ALPA property, he said—he still has his dad’s ALPA ring—and I fought to get my ALPA pin from 1994 to 2003, all the way. I was brought up with an understanding of trade unionism and the protection it provides.”

His father knew Capt. Dave Behncke, and F/O Keller heard all the “horror stories of 140-hour months and pilot-pushing and ‘fly or you’re fired.’ That’s where I learned the importance of the safety aspect of the union.”

And he learned about the need for intra-airline unity when he took his first manual labor job, fueling airplanes in college at Lambert International in St. Louis. “I learned what it’s like to be the working man, and treated as such,” he said. “You’d have pilots who’d walk right by you like you were invisible, and now I always make a point to talk with them. The rampers and the fuelers and the flight attendants and the pilots all need to be a team because they have a very coordinated effort against them.”

As soon as F/O Keller became an ALPA member, “I said, we’ve got to fix everything right here and now, from foreign workers to pay-for-training and on and on. As long as one pilot is unemployed anywhere, that allows any management to say, hey, there are people out there who would pay to do your job.”

And he knows the value of lessons learned at the beginning of a career. F/O Keller’s first Part 135 carrier job was with Grand Air, UPS’s biggest subcontractor out of Louisville at the time. When UPS’s Independent Pilots Association went on a sympathy strike with their ground crews in 1997, he said, “Our group of 100 pilots, through our refusing to fly struck goods, triggered the other subcontractors to refuse to fly struck goods as well, and we became the talking point for the smaller operators. We said, ‘Don’t fly on August 17,’ which turned out to be the last day of the strike. That was the last straw that made UPS go to the table, when they couldn’t get anyone to fly.

“Later, the IPA had a big congratulatory meeting, and they called us [Grand Air] one of the pivotal groups that helped them in their strike, by refusing to fly and urging others not to. Even if UPS was carrying one small planeload out of the city, that planeload was allowing them to say, ‘Hey, we’re still moving, we’re still operating.’ So on the last day of the strike, the ramp was littered with airplanes, and our group got a standing ovation in front of 800 people.

“Aside from the moment at the Executive Board meeting when we got up to accept ALPA’s invitation to join the Air Line Pilots Association, that was my proudest moment in aviation. A small group can make a difference.”