



# Determined Atlantic Southeast Pilots Vie with New Management

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throughout the industry. Some Generation-X pilots with 5 to 10 years of seniority are leaving the airline piloting profession because of their present pay and working conditions. (See

In the last year, pilots at Atlantic Southeast Airlines (ASA) have had the unique “opportunity” to experience the regional industry’s labor containment pressures as both employees of a wholly owned subsidiary and as a contract carrier. These war-weary veterans of Section 6 negotiations dodged bankruptcy when Delta Air Lines sold Atlantic Southeast to profitable SkyWest, Inc., in September 2005. However, even with a new parent company, they continue to face negotiation roadblocks. The 1,700-plus ASA pilots wonder what it will take to get their management, and their owner *du jour*, to finally settle on a new agreement.

The ASA pilots’ collective attitude can be summed up in three words—angry and frustrated. Although these pilots maintain their professional demeanor and skillfully perform their duties daily, they have been negotiating since September 2002 and in mediation since May 2004. Despite more than 240 sessions at the bargaining table, the two parties have tentatively agreed to only 12 of the existing 29 contract sections and have accomplished little in the last year.

The ASA pilots are practical, and they realistically face their circumstances. Like many of their peers, they have focused on quality-of-life issues as a primary target for their next agreement. Contract compliance has been a major undertaking for this group, and the pilots wish to make contract language clearer and easier to interpret to avoid future confusion and potential abuse. Subsequently, scheduling and related issues have been the topic of debate for more than a year.

Some of these contract-compliance problems have probably stemmed from the fact that Atlantic Southeast staffing levels have been insufficient in recent years, the pilot staffing deficit having been exacerbated by a recent trend witnessed

“Guest Commentary,” page 9.) This departure forces Atlantic Southeast management to hire new pilots simply to maintain its current staffing level.

However, negotiations remain the larger concern for the group. The more traditionally contentious issues—such as wages, benefits, and retirement—have yet to be discussed at length or in any detail. The parties have submitted initial proposals addressing these subjects, but the two parties continue to be mired in other sections.

What makes the ASA pilots’ circumstance so frustrating in these negotiations is the confounding nature of the situation in which they find themselves. Management has demonstrated very little interest in moving the collective bargaining process forward, much to the chagrin and puzzlement of the pilots’ negotiating team.

Capt. Bob Arnold, chairman of the ASA pilots’ Master Executive Council, notes, “After 39 months of negotiating, management just recently presented us with what amounts to its contract opener. Given management’s stalling tactics and the length of time it should have taken to negotiate this agreement, much of this process has been an unnecessary waste of both management and Association resources.

“There’s a certain amount of irony in this situation,” he says, given our management’s repeated interest in containing costs.”

Among other complicating factors, Atlantic Southeast, in its cost-plus markup arrangement with Delta (either as part of Delta or as part of SkyWest), has experienced continual growth.

Especially troubling is the management attitude that, to guarantee Atlantic Southeast’s desired profit margin,



ASA pilots engage in informational picketing outside Atlantic Southeast’s corporate offices in Atlanta, Ga.

PHOTOS: JOHN PERKINSON



Capt. Mike Pearson (Atlantic Southeast) speaks with a television reporter during an informational picketing session in Salt Lake City, Utah.

the ASA pilots must “pay for” the new fee-for-services agreement between SkyWest and Delta.

Since Atlantic Southeast began operations in June 1979, the airline has steadily acquired aircraft, hired pilots, and expanded its route structure. Delta took notice of the budding company in its Atlanta backyard and negotiated a code-share agreement in 1984 that enabled Atlantic Southeast to operate as a Delta Connection carrier. (ASA pilots voted for ALPA representation in 1987.)

Over time, Delta purchased shares of the airline, and Atlantic Southeast became a wholly owned subsidiary of the mainline carrier in 1999.

Throughout the last 10 years of operation, Atlantic Southeast has continued to provide feed for Delta mainline, while transitioning from a predominantly turboprop operation to a principally jet service. The carrier began flying more and more point-to-point trips (versus feeds), providing service on routes that are distances of more than 1,000 miles, and operating flights that, in time slot and route, sometimes parallel mainline flights. In recent years, it has not been uncommon to see a Delta MD-80 flying beside an Atlantic Southeast CRJ200 on routes like Atlanta Hartsfield to Washington National. Despite Atlantic Southeast’s small percentage of the Delta operation, the smaller airline has demonstrated great flexibility in meeting customer needs and supplementing mainline service.

ASA pilots were hoping to make a fresh start when they heard Delta announce on Sept. 28, 2005, that their airline had been sold to SkyWest, Inc., for \$425 million. Financially troubled Delta desperately needed cash, and Atlantic Southeast was an attractive asset. A week later, Delta filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Despite the growth and success of Atlantic Southeast and regardless of its owner, management has repeatedly communicated to its pilots the desire to contain costs in the current negotiations. As a wholly owned subsidiary, Atlantic Southeast operated in the shadows of a financially struggling mainline operation. Now, parent com-

pany SkyWest aspires to make Atlantic Southeast more marketable to Delta by containing or reducing ASA labor costs.

The pilot group has not taken this matter sitting down. To try to jumpstart the negotiating process, the pilots have used a variety of events and tools to communicate their frustration about the slow pace of talks.

Pilots have conducted extensive informational picketing at the Atlanta and the Salt Lake City airports, where their pilots are based. They also have picketed at their Atlanta corporate headquarters. On one occasion, the pilots erected a large circus-style tent and hosted a pilot appreciation day directly in front of company offices, with a catered lunch for pilots in between picketing shifts and others at the nearby Training Center. Most notably, the ASA pilots picketed the Delta Shareholders’ Meeting on May 19,

2005. More than 150 Atlantic Southeast pilots marched at locations around the Georgia International Convention Center to communicate to shareholders and the public their frustration. In each instance, the pilots capitalized on news media coverage.

The pilot group also has conducted Family Awareness functions, including a rally at meeting facilities within the Atlanta city zoo as well as at a Braves baseball game. They supplemented the latter event with an airplane banner tow, which included a special message to management.

Through area billboard postings, extensive mailings, and a variety of other communications—both internal and external—the ASA pilots have ensured that their current negotiations are not forgotten, that they are not planning to let up, and that more activities and events are planned for 2006. These negotiations have, in many respects, defined the ASA pilots. Despite the obstacles, these pilots have demonstrated their focus and tenacity, and continue to make known that they are willing to do whatever it takes to negotiate a fair agreement. ➤

## Atlantic Southeast Pilot Group at a Glance

**Number of Pilots:** 1,744

**Hubs:** Atlanta, Ga.; Salt Lake City, Utah

**Markets Served:** 126 airports in 38 U.S. states, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean—from Atlanta: 106 airports in 29 states, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean; from Salt Lake City: 25 airports in 10 states; from Cincinnati: 46 airports in 18 states

**Daily Flights:** More than 900

**Fleet:** Bombardier CRJ700s and CRJ200s, and a small number of ATR 72s for shorter-range flights