

STRENGTH IN UNITY

Airline Pilots Securing Their Future Through ALPA

Working Together Works for Alaska Labor Groups

Last fall, when Southwest Airlines threatened to move its operation from SeaTac Airport to nearby Boeing Field—a move that presented a threat to Alaska Airlines—the Alaska Airlines Labor Coalition banded together to urge elected representatives to reject the proposal and to protect jobs and quality-of-life issues in the region.

“This recent Boeing Field issue really provides one of the most illustrative demonstrations of how the Labor Coalition meetings can promote a win-win situation,” says Capt. Sean Cassidy, chairman of the Labor Coalition and the pilot liaison for the Alaska pilots’ MEC.

“In this case, we worked closely with management to present a united opposition to a concept that we believed was detrimental to our careers and our company’s economic future. Faced with a growing chorus of criticism from us, airline management, local businesses, and community members, the local county council ultimately tabled the Boeing issue, which was a victory for everyone,” he says.

Alaska Airlines’ labor leaders had started to think outside of the box slightly more than 5 years ago. What would happen, they asked, if the union leaders came together, in an informal setting, to share information, exchange ideas, and work together to strengthen all of their careers at their airline? They agreed that coming together to address issues that cut across labor lines at their airline could be valuable, but such an agreement needed some parameters on how it would work.

The result of these musings was the Alaska Airlines Labor Coalition—a “roundtable” type of meeting at which union representatives could meet informally, share information, and then present these items in a coordinated manner to upper-level management.

“Given the landscape in which we operate today—with broken relationships between unions and airline management and bankruptcy courts caving to management demands—creating and maintaining these bonds with our fellow unions and sharing information with one another is an important piece in protecting our livelihoods,” says the Alaska MEC chairman, Capt. Mark Bryant.

The Coalition, which meets quarterly in the Seattle ALPA MEC office, is made up of senior representatives from every unionized labor group of Alaska and Horizon Airlines, Alaska’s sister carrier under the Alaska Air Group parent company.

The Labor Coalition’s mission defines its purpose, according to Capt. Cassidy. That mission, he says, is “to improve and protect the wages, benefits, work rules, and



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job security of all of our members through communication and cooperation.”

While seemingly self-explanatory, and a natural goal for the unions individually, accomplishing that goal can be easier said than done. So, how does meeting quarterly help the labor groups at Alaska achieve that mission?

“The informal nature of these meetings is what makes them successful because they not only strengthen the ties between the unions, but they also allow for a very open and candid exchange of views around the table,” Capt. Cassidy says. “That free exchange of ideas and information sometimes can spark ideas that the union participants can then take back to their individual groups and build on.”

Several weeks before each meeting, union leaders and participants submit items of their own that they believe are of interest to the other groups for the agenda. Each meeting, which lasts 3 or 4 hours, begins with introductions and union updates to give union leaders an idea of the issues facing the various labor groups. The leaders then move on to the agenda items. Much of the information that is exchanged often involves dealings with different airline managers as well as experiences—both good

and bad—with arbitrators whom different labor groups have used.

The second function of the quarterly Coalition meetings is to prepare for quarterly meetings between Coalition participants and airline management. In the past year, these meetings have provided a forum for discussion on topics ranging from safety and operational concerns about the May 2005 outsourcing of ramp jobs in Seattle to pass policy issues and health benefits. Union leaders also have brought up concerns they've had with a general lack of preparedness and responsiveness that management has shown for arbitration time lines.

"To Alaska management's credit, they understand that there is merit in healthy debate and haven't made any attempts to stifle the very-often-heated conversations at these meetings," Capt. Cassidy says.

These management meetings begin with a private get-together between union leaders and Alaska CEO Bill Ayer. Horizon holds separate meetings between Horizon union representatives and management's leaders. The meetings with Ayer can turn into no-holds-barred sessions in which just about any topic is up for discussion, Capt. Cassidy says.

After the meeting with Ayer, union leaders meet with senior supervisors and managers. This larger get-together always begins with a business update from Alaska's CFO and vice-president of marketing. Capt. Cassidy says he thinks that union leaders appreciate this update because it gives them a direct pipeline to hear from decision-makers where they think the company is heading.

Although the meetings provide an opportunity to discuss issues frankly, that doesn't mean that just any topic is up for debate, Capt. Cassidy says. In an attempt to keep these meetings moving forward, both sides agree to ground rules—namely, specific union grievances as well as contractual negotiation items are generally out of bounds, because



Alaska Air Group Employees Labor Coalition members, from top: Association of Flight Attendants, ALPA, Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and Transport Workers Union of America.

they are better addressed more formally at the bargaining table.

In addition to bringing concerns to the attention of fellow labor unions and to management, the Coalition works to highlight labor issues for decision-makers outside of airline management and to the public at large.

The Coalition doesn't just meet, talk and write letters, though. Occasionally, it is called upon to organize public demonstrations. Most recently, the labor groups banded together to picket the 2005 shareholder's meeting at the Museum of Flight in Seattle. The picketing drew news media attention, spotlighting the plight of labor at Alaska Air Group in markets up and down the West Coast.

"That was a very positive opportunity to let the public know what was going on in the labor community and to address the shareholders in a very public way," Capt. Cassidy says. "By making the picketing a coordinated effort among labor groups, we had a larger showing that attracted more attention."

Union leaders aren't so naive as to believe that meetings several times per year—while positive and worthwhile events—can resolve all of the serious issues facing their workers, such as pay concessions, work rule changes, and benefit reductions that have become so prevalent in the U.S. airline industry today. In embracing the coalition concept, however, they are proving that coming together, sharing information, learning from one another, and working together truly brings strength in numbers.

—Jenn Farrell, Alaska MEC
Communications Specialist