

Making the Connection

Air Line Pilot sat down with ALPA's new president, Capt. John Prater, to discuss his early motivations, his goals for the union, and his plan to hit the road to connect with line pilots.

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Q When did you know you wanted to be a pilot?

A When I was about 10 or 11 years old, I lived underneath the approach to Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. I was always interested in flying, and in writing school reports on jet engines and airplanes, but I never thought I'd actually be able to become a pilot.

Q What spurred you originally to become a union activist, and what did you learn from those early experiences?

A I had grown up with a lot of knowledge of unions because my grandfather was a coal miner, and my mom told us stories of the labor wars in southern Illinois. I remember my dad butchering some of our cattle to help neighbors during some long strikes at local oil refineries. During college, I was a member of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters (now the UFCW) and was earning more than \$4 per hour while the nonunion stores paid 2 bucks. That union job allowed me to pay for college and flight training. I didn't know much about ALPA until I actually became a working pilot and became a first officer rep in the Union of Professional Airmen. Deregulation prompted me to become active in the union. I was hired by Continental before the October 1978 Airline Deregulation Act and saw the changes begin from that point forward. The final straw was the attempt to save Continental from being acquired by Frank Lorenzo, who eventually took over. It went downhill fast from there—our profession, our industry. The desire to fight back to save our profession, careers, and contract is what pushed me to become a union activist.

Q You played a pivotal role in the merger of ALPA and the Independent Association of Continental Pilots. What did you learn from that experience, and how will you apply it in your new position?

A I think it was the experience of being deeply involved in a labor war and having ALPA as our representative during the 1980s, then seeing what it was like working with Lorenzo and his ilk without a union. We ran a campaign for representation rights in 1993, and I campaigned for ALPA, but the IACP was certified. A lot of fears and misperceptions were left over from the 1983 strike over who ALPA represented and what ALPA's agenda was. After the union election was over, I became very involved in the IACP, and served Continental and the Continental Express pilots as their strike chairman for two contracts at each airline, and then became the IACP vice-president. But by early 2000, after two contracts, the members were willing to give a thorough look at what being part of a broader union means for our profession.

Many Continental and Continental Express pilots had



PHOTOS: JOCELYN AUGUSTINO

become strong union activists, and their leaders were willing to let the members choose their future course. Many ALPA leaders from other airlines like Delta, Mesaba, Northwest, United, and others spent weeks talking with our pilots—providing solid proof that ALPA's Unity Campaign was real and not just rhetoric. Those IACP and ALPA leaders along with the Continental and ExpressJet pilots were responsible for the 2001 vote to bring our pilots into ALPA. Naturally, there was heated debate and political fallout, but I know the Continental and ExpressJet pilots are proud to be active ALPA members. As president of our union, I will not forget that we should provide all of the information on any subject to our members and then trust them with the future of our profession. Our profession and our union will prosper if we maintain our members' trust and respect. Then we can expect their support in the battles we must fight.

I look forward to working with pilots from unorganized

with Capt. prater

pilot groups, as well as with the pilots and the leaders of independent unions, to lay the case for a broader union before them—no secrets; here's the set of facts; here are our perceptions of the world. I will ask them, Can we do a better job representing our profession by closing up old wounds, healing those wounds, and moving forward as one? For those members who have suffered disastrous concessions and question the future viability of ALPA at their airline, I'll share with them the views of a pilot who has been down that road.

Q What is your message to non-ALPA pilot groups out there?

A ALPA has already made a significant financial commitment to organizing. We are working with several pilot groups to join us. In organizing you need to wait for windows of opportunity to become a stronger union and then take advantage of them. There are also constant threats to weaken our union, because a lot of forces are trying to destroy our collective strength. We have to recognize those and counter them, but, yes, opportunities will lie before us, within the near future. We can better serve our profession by becoming a stronger international union. I believe many pilots from other airlines share that vision.

Q In a nutshell, why did you decide to run for president?

A Our pilots have given billions in concessions over these past five years. They wear deep scars from battle after battle with managements who have used bankruptcy as a weapon. Management had the upper hand due to economic circumstances, but that is changing. I ran for president because I want to make sure that these managements understand ALPA means business and we will work tirelessly to restore what we have lost. That means a more aggressive approach on all levels to advocate for our profession.



Q You're planning an aggressive tour to meet with pilots in the early part of 2007. What are



you trying to accomplish by doing this tour?

A I want to hear from our members. I want to talk with our members. It's a two-way street, and the only way to do that is to get out of Washington, to get out of the home office, and to go out and let them see that we need their involvement. The members have to understand, they have to believe—

just like their MEC leaders, their local council leaders, their committee volunteers—that the national officers are just another set of pilots. The national officers believe that we can be stronger as a union, and that we can do a better job, but only if the members are on board with us. The members have to feel that being a member of a strong union is much more than just paying dues. I want them to understand what we're trying to do, what our agenda is, and let them direct and help us shape the agenda for our profession.

I want our members to be proud of their profession and their union. Our members provide our collective strength and power as a union.

Q We're having this conversation days after a momentous U.S. congressional election. Without trying to tie your hands too specifically, how do you think it will affect ALPA's legislative agenda?

A (Wide grin) The answer is—we look forward to working with the members of both parties, the majority and the minority. We will have opportunities to address the issues that are pertinent, and some of those issues are right at our fingertips—like foreign control. Our legislative agenda is about protecting pilots' jobs, pilots' careers, pilots' profession, and pilots' ability to make a good living and enhance our pensions. We will address those issues with the new leaders of Congress. It takes a great deal of effort and resources—like our PAC—to ensure that the pilots' agenda and issues are included when legislation is developed. It takes coordination with members of Congress from both sides of the



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aisle to accomplish the goals of our members.

The same is true, of course, in Canada. I have already spoken with the new Canada Board to begin formulating a more aggressive agenda north of the border.

Q Speaking of Canada, what is your approach to supporting the pilots there, as well as increasing the

Association's ranks in the United States?

A Airline pilots are the same whether they fly for Canadian or U.S. carriers. Our issues, concerns, and needs are largely the same. Whether our members are facing a management bent on destroying a contract or working with government agencies, the power we create by collective action is what matters. The pilots in Canada have faced bankruptcies, mergers, deregulation, and concessions. Their experience as professionals and union activists makes ALPA a stronger advocate for pilots in this global industry.

Old wounds can fester and divide us, or we can work to find the solutions that will protect and enhance our members' careers. We are an international union and will go anywhere our members fly to protect their interests. Flying an unheated cargo airplane to Minneapolis for one winter, I swore I never wanted to be cold again, but I am looking forward to working with our Canadian brothers and sisters this coming winter. They tell me they have a potion that wards off the cold, and they know that their union solidarity provides plenty of protection!

Q As we try to help pilots get back what they lost, how are you going to continue to get pilots to cooperate across company lines once the competitive juices start flowing?

A I believe that our members, just like our union leaders, have learned from a very, very difficult five-year period that we cannot afford to try to take from each other. We've

got to join forces across company lines, *especially* when we're serving the same airline, even though we may work for four or five different-named corporate entities. We have to work together to ensure that all of the members are treated as professionals and provided with job protections, job security, career progression, and sufficient retirement. It doesn't matter whether you're 25 or 59, or the size of airplane you fly—we will work together on mutual issues to create our solutions. I intend to make that point over and over at our meetings with the pilots of our 39 pilot groups and every time I meet the news media or management.

Q How do you intend to leverage ALPA on a global stage?

A Our experience as the pilots' union through the years since deregulation will be critical. Some regions, such as the Far East—China, India—are entering a fantastic growth stage. We will help their professional organizations and the pilots from those countries through the International Federation of Air Line Pilots Associations. We will share our experiences in addressing issues like substandard navigational facilities, airport facilities, and other basic safety issues. Then we can go on to convince people that a good, solid relationship between government, industry, and our union is necessary to provide the highest level of safety.

Q What does working internationally mean for ALPA pilots?

A We fight the same battle here in our two countries, because of the competitive interest and the great pressure upon controlling cost, and many times those savings come at the cost of safety. We always have to keep our priorities straight, and we will commit the resources necessary to bring attention to any area where safety is in question. At the same time, ALPA is going to concentrate on providing what our members deserve. Many times we have spent our families' money, our bargaining power, to increase safety over immediate gain for the personal finances of our pilots. We're going to look again at our priorities and say, If the airline industry is not addressing these issues, we're going to take our agenda back to Washington and Ottawa to make sure that the government is focusing on those issues—from inane rules for crew access to pension protections to fatigue and flight-time/duty-time regulations.

Those issues affect pilots all over the world. Some managers would keep pilots on duty 24 hours a day if that's cheaper than hiring one more pilot. We're not going to be shy about putting those issues before Congress, Parliament, and the global news media. We have a long history of "learning" from accidents. We've learned many of those lessons, and



what we're going to talk about is not backsliding and allowing those conditions to grow again, at the expense of safety.

Q You teed this one up nicely. What major safety and security issues do you feel are going to be on the top of your list?

A First, convincing the U.S. government that pilots are not the enemy when it comes to security. We have what seem to be minor issues, but when you cannot get to work without being frisked, despite all our members' having had background security clearances, it is ridiculous. The focus on searching pilots takes resources away from the government's and the airports' ability to increase actual security. The way it's done now is inefficient and extremely frustrating.

On the safety front—we have a litany starting with fatigue, adequate crew rest facilities, and flight-time and duty-time issues. Runway incursions, airport markings, ATC, navigation facilities, criminalization of pilots involved in accidents and incidents, ETOPS, ASAP and FOQA, hazmat, are all areas we will be addressing with industry and government.

Q When it comes to one level of safety and security, much of the work remains undone. What priority are you going to put on cargo safety and security?

A I flew cargo for five years, flying the U.S. mail and other cargo, and I flew it again after the Continental strike. I have experience with the needs and the demands of that lifestyle and that portion of the industry. Using that experience, I look forward to working with the leaders and the pilots of the cargo carriers because we need to address their specific needs and concerns. But we are still one profession. We have to make our members understand that this union does not have A, B, or C pilots—we're professional airline pilots. It doesn't matter the size of the airplane, the method of propulsion, or what is behind the cockpit door. We all do the same job, but we work for different airlines. But as a profession, we're one. As a union, we're one.

Q The last five years have been really difficult and brutal on airline pilots. What steps do you think you and ALPA can take to begin to rebuild the sense of pride that has taken a beating?

A Rebuilding pride is one of the reasons we're going to the members first. Our members haven't lost one ounce of their professionalism. Many of our members have had their own personal finances and pensions devastated, but as professionals these members continue to maintain the highest levels of safety as true professionals. Our members made concessions to help the industry recover from the terrorist activities of five years ago, but we will not continue to subsidize our industry. Our members rightfully expect their contracts to recover in this next round of bargaining.

Q What do your wife and daughter think of all this?

A When my daughter, Alex, was in third grade, I received a phone call from her principal, informing me that Alex was in her office, filing a group grievance on behalf of her class against the substitute teacher. My wife, Michele, was not particularly happy, but I figured the apple of my eye did not fall too far away from me. Now if any member has advice on raising a teenage daughter, I am all ears. My wife was on strike when she was in her probationary period as an Ozark Airlines flight attendant, and she grew up with a father who was a UAW organizer. She understands unions and will help other spouses understand why ALPA volunteers give so much of themselves—because that's the only way we can protect and provide for our families. She understands the dedication of ALPA volunteers and staff, and she looks forward to joining in the fight wherever that fight comes to us. She'll be the one carrying a picket sign bigger than she is. ☺

