

Severe Turbulence

Almost every ALPA pilot group is currently facing the uncertainty of shutdown, merger, spin-off, acquisition, or other corporate transaction. Meanwhile, many of our members face the reality of working for management teams that do not possess the acumen to create a viable business plan, much less a successful strategy to convince investors to finance their airlines.



Five of our ALPA pilot groups—Aloha, ATA, Champion, Kitty Hawk, and Skyway—are facing the aftermath and turmoil of complete shutdown. Frontier has filed for bankruptcy, Midwest and Sun Country face furloughs, and other airlines are rapidly approaching their own decision point.

One year ago and again this past month, I addressed airline industry analysts, investors, and CEOs at the annual JPMorgan Airline Conference. My two main points were that airline pilots were finished subsidizing poor decisions by managers who focus on rewarding themselves, and that those managers and investors who address contract issues before amendable dates or mergers would do better than those who delay or try to go around ALPA and the pilots' elected representatives.

In the year since that first Wall Street conference, ALPA MECs and their bargaining teams—assisted by the Association's professional negotiators, financial analysts, retirement specialists, and communicators—have completed several Section 6 contracts and approved many significant letters of agreement. For many pilot groups, union staff and MEC bargaining teams have negotiated improvements in bankruptcy-era contracts that were not due to open for several years.

All of these agreements improved the wages, working conditions, or retirement security of ALPA members. The key to progress in each case was you—the line pilot—who provided the solidarity and commitment to walk the walk by acting in support of your pilot group and for other ALPA groups as well.

Wall Street, Congress, and the news media are focused on potential future mergers of the legacy airlines. Investors and CEOs have approached ALPA and the MEC leaders of our four largest passenger airlines to determine our up-front needs to make a proposed merger work. While few pilots look forward to mergers, even fewer complete a career without at least one major transaction on their resumé.

Should we look at these mergers as threats to our future or as opportunities to restore our profession? To answer that, I have to start with seniority integration, because an integration process that is not carefully considered by pilot representatives can destroy the unity of a combined pilot group and obliterate its leverage to negotiate a new contract and cause deep divisiveness among our members.

Last year, the new Executive Council and newly elected

national officers inherited two active mergers. In each, the MECs had asked the previous Executive Council to initiate ALPA Merger Policy—one in 2005 and one in 2006. In both cases, after failing to reach a consensual solution to create a merged seniority list, each of the four MECs—America West, US Airways, Atlas, Polar—made their independent decisions to proceed to the last step: binding arbitration by selecting a neutral party to create their merged lists.

In both of these mergers, for various reasons, the MECs have been unable to reach consensus on negotiating a joint contract with their management, which would be ratified separately by each MEC and each pilot group. ALPA Merger

Pilots know what to do when they fly through severe turbulence. I have faith that we can “fly our airplane” now, but it will take your personal commitment, and accountability and leadership at both the pilot group and ALPA national levels, to deliver on that faith.

© JASON BRANNE, FOTOLIA.COM

Policy and applicable contract provisions require a single ratified contract before the arbitrator's combined seniority list can be implemented.

In the America West/US Airways merger, the fight has escalated to the point that, by April 18, those 5,000 pilots may have left ALPA. Some East pilots used a new pseudo-union as a promise to East pilots and a threat against West pilots that they would use their larger numbers to demand a new seniority list with US Airways management. What kind of union bases its existence on overpowering fellow pilots?

While I have created a Merger Policy Review Committee to review the policy and recommend changes, if needed, to ALPA's Board of Directors, our real strength must be found within the leaders and members of merging pilot groups. No single formula can deliver a perfect agreement. And delivering our fate to an arbitrator can lead to division and that, in turn, cedes power to management, enabling them to keep underpaid and overworked pilots fighting for decades.

Pilots know what to do when they fly through severe turbulence. I have faith that we can “fly our airplane” now, but it will take your personal commitment, and accountability and leadership at both the pilot group and ALPA national levels, to deliver on that faith.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Prater". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.