

# AirTran Pilots

“**T**herefore be it hereby resolved that the Executive Board approves the ALPA-National Pilots Association (NPA) Merger Agreement,” said Capt. Jay Pierce, the Continental pilots’ Master Executive Council chairman, in a clear, ringing voice from the podium. “Be it further resolved that the merger of NPA with ALPA shall be effective May 1, 2009, and...that the AirTran Master Executive Council is established effective May 1, 2009, and...that ALPA welcomes all members of NPA as members of ALPA.”

ALPA’s president, Capt. John Prater, called the voice vote, and the entire Board called out, “Aye!”

“I am honored to be the first to welcome the pilots of AirTran Airways as members of the Air Line Pilots Association,” Prater said with obvious pride in this tremendous accomplishment (by ALPA and the AirTran pilots) and what it means to the airline piloting profession.

Tumultuous applause rose from ALPA’s Executive Board, meeting April 28 near Washington, D.C., and a new chapter in ALPA’s history began.

In an emotional speech, AirTran acting MEC chairman, First Officer Linden Hillman, declared, “I came here lifted on the shoulders of 1,700 AirTran pilots. People doubted us, but we proved them wrong. Our pilots stuck together and demanded change. Not just from frustration, but in hope. Not just in anger, but of opportunity. Today we find a new way forward, after a long path cleared by thousands of airline pilots before us.... My ALPA brothers

and sisters, the fight is joined on this brand-new day. I thank you.”

## The journey

The road to this juncture in ALPA history has been long and arduous, with many potholes.

The current AirTran Airways came into existence in 1997 when ValuJet, a low-cost airline, acquired smaller AirTran. The AirTran pilots then formed NPA, an independent union.

In the nearly 12 years of its existence, NPA negotiated two pilot contracts. But in 2008, when negotiations for their third contract were in their fourth year and when contract enforcement stalled, the AirTran pilots’ frustrations reached a boiling point.

In December 2008 the NPA leaders invited representatives from both ALPA and the Teamsters to make presentations to the NPA Board of Directors. The NPA Board picked ALPA as the clear choice for a merger. During a series of meetings in January and February, teams repre-

**ALPA welcomes AirTran’s near Association and pledges \$5 million to help them get—and enforce—their contract but couldn’t achieve through the independent union.**



**By Jan W. Steenblik,**  
Technical Editor



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PHOTOS: WILLIAM A. FORD

**MAIN PHOTO: F/O Linden Hillman, AirTran acting MEC chairman, addresses the Executive Board members after they unanimously voted the AirTran pilots into ALPA. LEFT: Capt. Prater presents F/O Hillman with a framed copy of the ALPA Code of Ethics to hang on the wall in the ATN MEC office.**

senting ALPA and NPA hammered out a merger agreement. On Feb. 19, 2009, the NPA Board voted unanimously, 6-0, to approve and endorse the merger agreement between ALPA and NPA.

AirTran pilots voted on ratification of the merger agreement during the period March 11-April 10. ALPA and NPA reps hosted road shows for AirTran pilots for several weeks. More than 1,400

of the 1,700 AirTran pilots attended these events to ask questions and learn more about ALPA, and more than 100 AirTran pilot volunteers helped during the campaign (see "Strength in Unity: Moving the Ball Downfield," April).

### Executive Council

On April 15, just 5 days after the end of the overwhelmingly pro-ALPA vote by AirTran pilots was counted, the ALPA Executive Council unanimously approved the merger and recommended its adoption to the Executive Board.

The Council greeted the entire NPA Board of Directors with a standing ovation. John Prater then welcomed AirTran pilots into the Association and declared that all 53,000 members stood ready to help them achieve their goals.

He also applauded the tremendous support that AirTran pilots gave ALPA during the merger process.

"The 88 percent vote in favor of the merger is almost as impressive as the fact that 94 percent of the pilots voted," Prater said. "It speaks volumes about your members and their commitment to a brighter future."

"This vote brings our pilots one step closer to full membership in ALPA," said Hillman. "The full resources of the Association will soon be supporting us as we continue to work for a fair and equitable contract."

"It's not only a big day for the 1,700 pilots of AirTran but for every other pilot group considering joining ALPA, as well as those that may come back," said F/O Tim Baker, chairman of the

**Capt. Prater shakes hands with F/O Tim Baker, chairman of the NPA Merger Committee, who was instrumental in bringing the AirTran pilots into ALPA, after they signed the ALPA-National Pilots Association Merger Agreement.**



NPA Merger Committee. “Our goal is to show the industry that you can have a strong, enforceable pilot contract and still function as a successful low-cost carrier. They are not mutually exclusive.”

With final action by ALPA’s Executive Board approving the merger of NPA into ALPA, they’re on their way to doing just that.

As both ALPA and NPA leaders have emphasized, AirTran pilots still are in charge of their own destiny. *They* must—and assuredly will—create their own future. They must roll up their sleeves and do what it takes to achieve their goals. Successful pilot

groups need capable pilot leaders, active members, and volunteers. The ALPA campaign shows that the AirTran pilot group already contains those essential elements. But they’re now coupled to the other essential

element—a much bigger engine, with more horsepower and a bigger fuel tank, in the form of assistance from other pilot groups and unmatched professional resources, so that future is looking a lot brighter. 🌟



**Outside of ALPA’s Washington, D.C., office, members of the Executive Council pose with AirTran pilots after unanimously approving the merger agreement with the National Pilots Association (NPA).**

## A Serious Commitment— \$5 million from MCF For AirTran Pilots

NPA has been negotiating an amended collective bargaining agreement with AirTran Airways management for approximately 4 years. The AirTran pilots want to increase their bargaining power substantially, significantly enhance member communications, and prepare strategically.

The purpose of ALPA's Major Contingency Fund (MCF) is to support these initiatives. ALPA's Executive Council therefore recommended, and the Executive Board approved, a request from the AirTran pilots' leaders for an MCF grant of \$5 million.

The Executive Council and Executive Board found that the activities to be covered by the grant and the size of the grant were consistent with the purposes of the MCF and consistent with recent allocations to other, similar-sized pilot groups. For example, the Executive Board, in its April meeting, also authorized a \$5 million (CDN) MCF grant to the Air Canada Jazz Master Executive Council for strategic preparedness, communications, and family awareness efforts to help the Air Canada Jazz pilots obtain a new contract, and a \$5 million grant to the Alaska Airlines MEC for similar purposes. ↵



**AirTran pilots attend the ALPA Executive Council meeting in Washington, D.C. on April 15, 2009.**

## Pitching a Bigger Tent

ALPA's merger with NPA is very much in keeping with the Association's long-term strategic plan, recently reinforced by the ALPA Board of Directors during its October 2008 meeting.

During that meeting, BOD Delegate Committee 8 (Membership/Organizing) concluded that organizing is vital to the Association's efforts to connect members with their union and keeping ALPA the preeminent voice of the airline piloting profession. The Delegate

Committee recommended, and the BOD approved, a resolution that in part reaffirmed the 2000 BOD Unity Resolution (i.e., that ALPA wants to eventually represent all North American airline pilots) to be ALPA's guiding principle and long-term goal consistent with the recognition that organizing target decisions must be made strategically through the work of ALPA's Organizing Task Force to ensure that ALPA can effectively represent both current and newly organized pilot groups. ↵

## A Day at the Circus

Grievances usually involve (1) contract violations or (2) disciplinary action. But the AirTran pilots have a backlog of both to resolve. AirTran management seems to look for fights on issues that other airlines work out. Here's an example:

In March, the company suspended a pilot for wearing his uniform while dropping off his wife and two young children at a circus in Atlanta on February 21—at an NPA-sponsored family day—as he was on his way to work.

"He was wearing his uniform so that he could get to work on time," said First Officer Tim Baker, NPA spokesman. "The circus started at 3 p.m., and he had to be at work at 4:30 p.m. He was leaving on a 4-day trip and wanted to spend as much time with his kids as possible.

He will soon be deployed overseas and is focused on spending time with his family. He only stayed at the circus for a few minutes. The rules even state that he can wear his uniform to and from work."

The AirTran pilot is a pilot in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, in which he has served for 13 years, and will deploy to Iraq soon.

F/O Hillman, then NPA president, said, "It is intolerable for our pilots to be exposed to this type of intimidation. We have tried to resolve this issue directly with management. However, we continue to find management unreasonable. It would be nice to see management focused on returning to profitability, instead of threatening their hardworking crewmembers. Some airlines seem to actually appreciate and recognize their employees' contributions." ↵