

Not Forgotten: Part 1

Furloughed But Not Forgotten

By Kimberly Seitz, ALPA Senior Communications Specialist

Editor's note: This is the first article in a three-part series that highlights the support and services that ALPA staff, volunteers, and others are providing to furloughed ALPA members and to those who lose their jobs to airline closures.

There may come a time in a pilot's career when he or she receives the dreaded "Gee, we're sorry, but we need to make staffing cuts and your number is up" letter that finds its way into the mailbox. F/O Scott Lefforge (Delta) knows how it feels to be furloughed and floundering—waiting for the recall.

"I was one of the first 400 Delta pilots to be furloughed after 9/11," Lefforge says. "I had moved my wife and three small children from California to Texas earlier that year, and we had just bought a house when I received my furlough letter in mid-October. It took me until January just to get my bearings."

But for F/O Joel Barman (Air Wisconsin), a furlough notice isn't quite as bad as waking up one morning and realizing you no longer have a job (or the prospects of a recall) because your airline has decided to close shop. Barman was flying for Independence Air when the airline ceased operating on Jan. 6, 2006.

"Even though the company dropped the bomb with 30 days' notice per the collective bargaining agreement," Barman recalls, "nothing really prepares you for that moment when you are out of a job and you know there's no going back." More than 1,200 Independence Air pilots lost their jobs when the regional airline shut down. Since that 2006 closure, more than 2,200 additional pilots have also been culled from the cockpit due to airlines' shutting down.

And many more have been temporarily let go due to insufficient work loads.

The airline industry has certainly seen its share of ups and downs, with higher furlough spikes in the 1980s after deregulation and the horrific events of 9/11—a time when more than 7,000 ALPA pilots were out on the streets. The industry was beginning to show signs of recovery in 2007 when domestic airlines began hiring again, and a predicted pilot shortage led some regional airlines to cut their hiring requirements just to fill open slots. However, high fuel prices and a sluggish economy during the summer of 2008 saw the number of furloughed pilots swell. While individually many may feel lost and alone, they certainly aren't forgotten.

In July 2008, ALPA's president, Capt. John Prater, created the national Furloughed Pilots Support Program (FPSP) under ALPA's Membership Committee. The Program focuses on pilots who are ejected from the cockpit due to downsizing.

"Having a coordinated Furloughed Pilots Support Program at the national level is essential to our entire membership in good times and in bad," says F/O Larry Deist (Delta), the FPSP coordinator and Council 44 F/O rep. "Obviously, when airlines are furloughing, we need to provide support; but ALPA also needs to be cognizant of the ever-looming potential for furloughs and have a plan in place to mitigate that threat and provide standing support structures if needed."

ALPA's support for its members during times of increased furloughs is well documented as evidenced by the quick mobilization of ALPA staff and resources after 9/11—but the creation of the FPSP is the first time the effort has been centralized and formalized into a standing initiative outlined in ALPA's *Administrative Manual*. Since its inception, the FPSP has undertaken and reemphasized numerous initiatives:

- **Job assistance**—All furloughed ALPA pilots receive a complimentary 1-year membership to FltOps.com, which



The Furloughed Pilots Support Program communicates with pilots in many ways, including via the quarterly publication *Flight Path*, above.

specializes in job-hunting and career decision assistance to professional pilots and provides access to up-to-date information on pilot hiring, airline profiles, pilot pay, major airline interview briefings, and more. Membership also includes access to an afternoon session of a FltOps job fair.

- **Information dissemination**—ALPA's Membership and Information Technology Departments have set up a dedicated distribution list of all furloughed pilots that's designed to automate and simplify the registration process for membership in FltOps.com. Pertinent information is also sent to all member pilot groups via the "Furlough Coordinators" distribution list. Of the 38 ALPA pilot groups, 24 have furlough coordinators/administrators while the remainder receive the information via their Membership Committee

As of July 2010, 7.1 percent—3,635 ALPA members—were listed as furloughed.

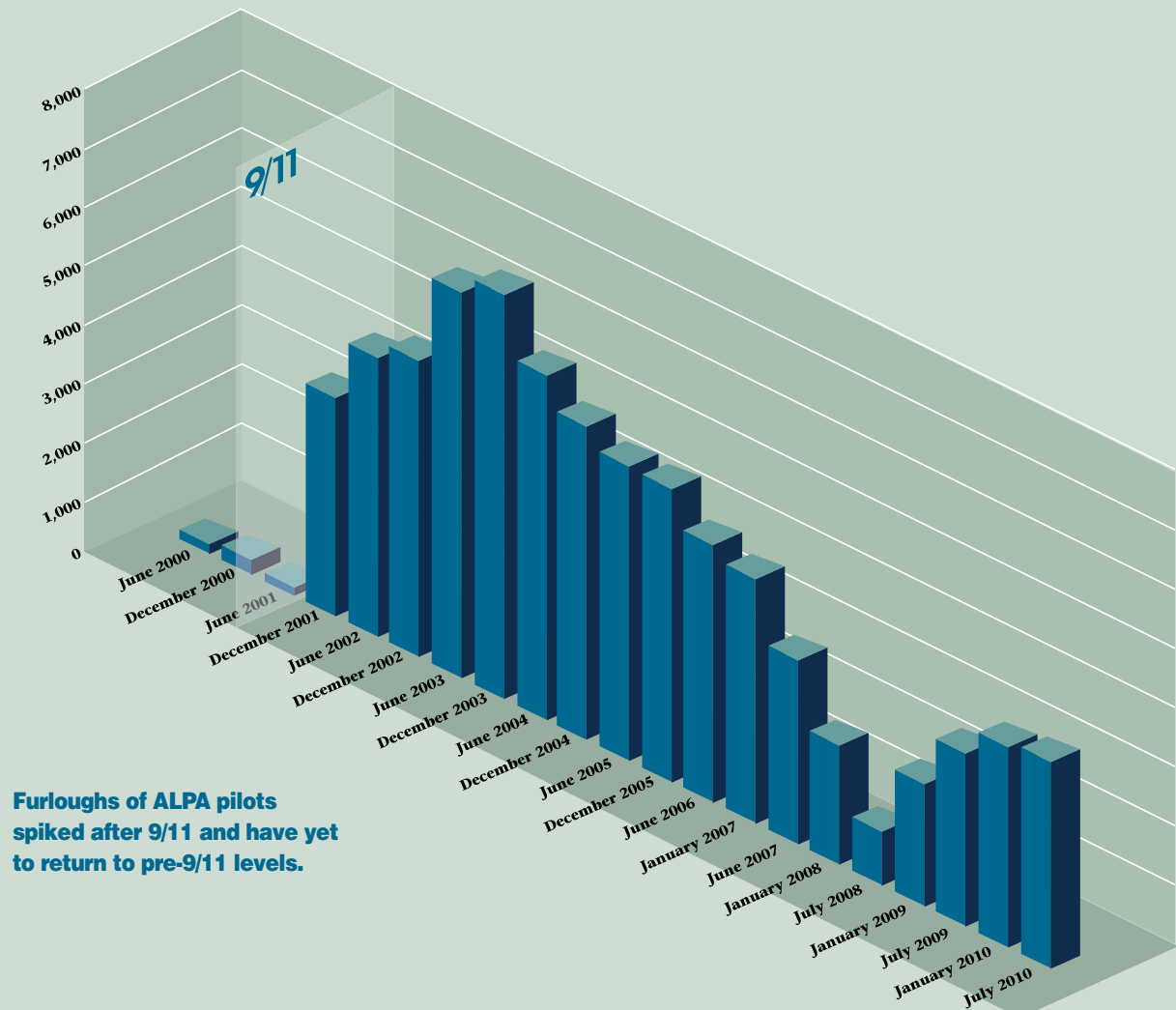
chairman or another designated master executive council representative. Job leads, discount offers, and any other information deemed useful is sent to this distribution list as it becomes known.

- **Dedicated publication**—*Flight Path*, launched in December 2008 with the help of ALPA's Communications Department, is the quarterly publication designed and created for furloughed ALPA pilots. The newsletter, also distributed to pilots who lost their jobs due to airline closures, highlights services offered by furloughed ALPA pilots who are trying to make a living while waiting for their recall and announces airlines that offer preferential interviewing for furloughed ALPA members. Employment assistance and job opportunities are also highlighted. Past issues have included pertinent and timely information from ALPA's Retirement and Insurance Department with detailed explanations of COBRA benefits and the federal subsidy, how to access 401(k) accounts, how to file unemployment benefits, financial survival tips and techniques, and the myriad services provided by the AFL-CIO's Union Plus program. Furlough administrators/coordinators from the individual airlines are encouraged to submit articles and/or stories about their programs and successes.

- **Best practices**—The FPSP is also coordinating the ongoing development of a furlough "model" that MECs and furlough administrators/coordinators can use to customize a program best suited for their needs. "The furloughed pilots at PSA probably have different needs than the pilots furloughed at United," says Deist. "They also have differing levels of pilot volunteers and available resources. By creating a 'best practices' model, all MECs will be able to provide the resources that suit their needs and can be adapted to their airline's culture."

- **Updated website**—An FPSP website, which can be accessed by going to www.alpa.org and clicking on the Furloughed Pilots Support Program icon in the right-hand column, provides information ranging from medical and unemployment benefits to stress management to where to go for financial help/advice; a job search tool; and links to government resources. Recognizing that one size does not fit

ALPA Pilot Furloughs—1973 to Mid-2010



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all, Deist has solicited feedback from furloughed pilots themselves to make sure any and all issues are addressed. "This is their program, and their input is critical to its success."

Deist offers an astute perspective on what this particular audience needs—he endured a nearly 4-year furlough and was the furlough coordinator for Delta during the industry upheaval after 9/11. Deist's performance as furlough coordinator at Delta earned him the national coordinator role and motivates him to mirror Delta's success at the national level and to carry that through to other pilot groups.

Lefforge describes how Delta's MEC program, headed by Deist, provided him with support during the 5 years he was furloughed from the airline. "Delta implemented a strong support system for furlougees," he recalls. "A furlough sponsor was provided to every furloughed pilot who wanted one. Funds were made available for emergencies. Larry distributed information on unemployment and insurance. That first Christmas I even received a check from an anonymous donor. The regular contact was important to my mental health."

Lefforge initially struggled to support his family as a licensed realtor before landing an aviation-related job writing technical manuals for a defense contractor. "You eventually get used to the new norm," he says, "but it's really important for the union to get behind and stay behind these guys."

Recalled in December 2006, Lefforge has this advice to those who are furloughed or those who expect to be furloughed: "As soon as you get the letter, start looking for something to do. Don't wait for something to just happen, go out and make it happen. Gainful employment provides motivation to keep going. There are psychological benefits in knowing where your next paycheck is coming from." All Delta furlougees have been offered recall, and Delta is now hiring.

Lefforge credits his experience with ALPA as a furlougees as the motivating factor to becoming a union volunteer when he returned to flying the line, and he now serves as his MEC's scheduling chairman.

The same is true of Barman. As with most airline closures in the recent past, ALPA quickly and efficiently mobilized to host

a career workshop and job fair at the Association's Herndon, Va., offices immediately after the January 2006 shutdown of Independence Air. Barman was one of the lucky pilots. By the end of that month, he had found work as a pilot with Air Wisconsin, whose MEC had secured from management preferential interviews for Independence Air pilots. Barman used his experience at Independence Air in his role as furlough coordinator at Air Wisconsin in early 2008.

"I knew what it was like to be an out-of-work pilot," he explains, "so I knew I was the perfect person to serve in this capacity. I also knew that ALPA's support for furlougees wasn't nearly as focused then as it is now, and I wanted my pilots to feel like they had someone they could turn to. My wife and I created furlough packets and tried to provide as much information as we could on how and where to file for unemployment, how to access COBRA, where to look for jobs, how to get supplemental insurance, etc." Barman also provided additional assistance to individual pilots who were denied unemployment and worked diligently to secure preferential interviews at Compass and Cape Air.

"My greatest joy was getting the vacancy awards and calling each and every recalled pilot and saying, 'Welcome back,'" he says. "I also tried to be on hand during their training events to personally welcome them back into the cockpit."

Barman, who now serves as LEC 51 chairman and F/O rep, is "happy furlougees have become a higher priority for ALPA. The national furlough program provides much-needed resources and increases the communications among pilot groups. This is a first, big step in providing a greater degree of hope for ALPA pilots who find themselves on the receiving end of a furlough letter." All Air Wisconsin furlougees have been recalled and the airline has begun hiring.

The next agenda item for the FPSP is standardized furlough mitigation language that can be added to all ALPA contracts, something Barman insists is necessary because "companies don't handle furloughs with much dignity."

"Hopefully with a continual examination of our processes, programs, and policies, combined with member input, we can break the cycle of reaction and move to an arena of proactive approaches to what has historically been one of the worst aspects of the airline industry. We have to do better by these pilots," Deist says. "We're definitely headed in the right direction, but we are far from our goal." 🌀

The October issue will spotlight ALPA's Legal and Representation Departments and the staff members who continue to ensure that contractual obligations outlined in the pilots' collective bargaining agreements are fulfilled and that all federal obligations are met when an airline shuts down.

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— *F/O Larry Deist (Delta)*
Furloughed Pilots Support Program
coordinator and Council 44 F/O rep