

The Ties That Bind

Back in 1952, when George Meany was elected president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL),



he found himself leading a divided labor movement. He believed that there should be room in the house of organized labor for all unions, no matter how different the work of those members was. So he set about the task of combining the AFL with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and in 1955, the AFL-CIO became a reality.

Today the Federation has 10.5 million members in 56 different unions—teachers and taxi drivers, musicians and miners, farm workers and flight attendants, bakers and bottlers, engineers and editors, pilots (that’s ALPA) and public employees, doctors and nurses, painters and plumbers. The AFL-CIO is a powerful influence in the world for the rights of workers, far stronger than any of these diverse professions and trades could be standing alone.

What does this mean to our Association—to our pilot union? It means that diversity works. We may fly different equipment, or routes, or sides of the clock; but at our core, we are all pilots. It means that our fee-for-departure brothers and sisters, our legacy-airline brothers and sisters, our cargo-airline brothers and sisters, and our ACMI brothers and

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sisters all bring to our union different challenges, different experiences, and different solutions. But we all are grounded in one profession. Diversity means that ALPA, by knitting together this deep and rich experience level, has created the absolutely best organization for representing *all* airline pilots.

If every pilot group that preceded us made decisions based on its own particular situation and an “I-don’t-give-a-damn” attitude toward what is best for the overall profession, where would we be? The answer is clear, we’d be stuck in whatever corner managements and their allies chose to stick us. Make no mistake, the challenges we face are tremendous and sometimes terrifying. As I write this, many of our brothers and sisters are losing their jobs via shutdowns and furloughs. But only through the strength that comes from working together



and the willingness to face not only our individual problems but each other’s as well can ALPA pilots save this profession for ourselves and those who come behind us.

ALPA is, and will always remain, a democratic institution, with our elected pilot representatives—the local executive councils and master executive councils—leading their members and advocating for their issues. But when the power of our democracy (despite its resemblance to sausage-making from time to time)—is channeled into one unified effort by our Board of Directors, Executive Board, and Executive Council—we can’t be stopped, even as we confront the obstacles of these difficult days.

“One size fits all,” they tell us. But when was the last time you picked up a piece of clothing that fit everyone in your family? The truth is that the ever-changing and pluralistic nature of our environment over the last decades has made uniformity obsolete. One size just doesn’t “fit all” anymore. And at ALPA, it never did. In fact, diversity is the basic core and fiber of ALPA; it’s what makes us a strong and vibrant international union.

Diversity provides the sum and substance of a healthy system. How many of us want the pilot in the other seat to sit by quietly in a dicey flying situation and not give his take on the next step? Or how many of us really have no interest in helping out someone who has needs that are a bit different than ours?

My point is that, although many people think it is difficult for a multi-airline international union to remain strong and unified, those of us who have the privilege of watching ALPA pilots at work know this couldn’t be further from the truth.

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Earlier this month we celebrated the United States’ fight for independence, which was made real by the combined efforts of 13 different colonies with many different, opinionated, brilliant, ordinary, committed people banding together for a single purpose. Let us remember that, as the citizens and leaders of our two nations work together to fix today’s big problems, so, too, can ALPA pilots fight together for our profession.