



# Union Work Is Never Done— A Debrief for 2007–2010

**By Capt. John Prater**, ALPA President



**Following every line flight, a captain's honest debrief with himself and his crew sets the stage for professional improvement for future flights.** I hold that concept to be just as valid for ALPA representatives following every union decision and will conduct my debrief with you in

my final *Pilot to Pilot*.

In the 4 years that I've served as your president, our union and profession have faced many challenges and threats. *Each one of those challenges becomes a strength when ALPA members and their reps harness their collective will to overcome them.* This is the main lesson I've learned during these past 4 years. Reflecting on my 30+ years of union service, beginning as a first officer rep in 1977, there are also other important lessons to consider as we look to the future.

Within the first 2 months of my term, U.S. airline pilots were confronted with the reality of the 2006 ICAO change that altered the pilot-in-command age 60 limitation. At that time, I informed our governing bodies and members that I believed the Age 60 rule would be changed in the United States to comply with ICAO and that ALPA should immediately work with Congress to try to influence the introduced legislation, prevent retired pilots from returning to the line with seniority, and maintain Age 60 as the normal retirement age for frozen or active defined-benefit (DB) plans.

ALPA members held strong convictions—both pro and con—about changing Age 60. But the change was inevitable—demonstrated by ICAO's and the FAA's decision, Congress's almost unanimous vote for it, and President Bush signing it into law. I believe our union acted responsibly then and continues to act on behalf of our pilots, as ALPA worked to defeat subsequent attempts to change the retirement age in DB plans and successfully opposed litigation by retired pilots to return with seniority.

The US Airways-America West and Polar-Atlas mergers proved to be extremely difficult challenges for the Association. The root of the issue? Local reps were unable to find consensus with each other—ultimately leading to their pilots' destroying ALPA representation at their airlines.

One of my frustrations—and failures—was that regardless of how many merger-experienced ALPA reps and advisors we provided the local reps, they refused to resolve their difficult problems, to the ultimate detriment of all pilots. While reps from both groups asked me to overrun the other's position, no one was willing to yield and always held final control per

our bylaws. Recognizing that further consolidation was on the horizon, we revised ALPA merger policy to address some of the events that contributed to the situation; for example, the policy encourages the merging pilot groups to negotiate a unified contract before merging lists. These two mergers clearly exemplified that nothing can prevent a failure if pilots and their union reps believe that they can beat another pilot group by terminating their ALPA representation even if it means killing their opportunity to improve their contracts.

Management was the real winner as those pilots continue to fly under severe contract concessions that could have long been over if local ALPA leaders had worked to lead their pilots to consensual decisions, but that proved to be impossible.

I hope the hindsight and lessons learned from these two examples, along with our revised merger policy, will help the local union leaders at Colgan, Mesaba, and Pinnacle; Continental and United; Atlantic Southeast and ExpressJet; and AirTran and Southwest make the hard decisions required to ensure successful mergers for their pilots.

I am greatly encouraged by the efforts of our Strategic Planning and Strike Committee and the collective response by so many of our members when the call for action goes out. During ongoing mergers and contract negotiations, our members have shown strong cross-airline solidarity and support for each other. Nothing has made me prouder than your collective actions, both in Canada and in the United States, at rallies, demonstrations, informational pickets, and, yes, your support during the Spirit strike.

From the first contracts I signed at Atlantic Southeast, Alaska, and Delta through new contracts at Jazz, Wasaya, and Air Transat to the most recent at AirTran, though none was perfect, all improved our members' working lives and demonstrated that our international union, supported by your unfailing resolve, can get the job done.

ALPA's national committee structure is a source of strength and expertise in every area—providing ALPA with the power and respect to bring about positive change for our profession. With pilots from 38 airlines flying under every imaginable condition, and every type of management, ALPA volunteers share their expertise without question, providing our members with resources that can be found nowhere except through your union.

*ALPA takes on every challenge, from security and safety concerns to furloughs and organizing to bankruptcy and other legislative issues to pilot professionalism and training.* Our members provide the strength, clout, and expertise, and they are backed by a team of professional and respected staff members who work to protect our profession. ALPA's affiliation and advocacy

within IFALPA, the AFL-CIO, the TTD, the CLC, ICAO, and every forum in which pilot issues may be decided, provide our members with an unrivaled global voice.

Your willingness to fund our political action committee, ALPA-PAC, provides our profession with the strongest pilot voice on Capitol Hill. I salute the 13 percent of our members who participate, but I believe that number should be much larger. Again, I respectfully ask ALPA members to understand ALPA-PAC's vital importance to our profession and careers and ask you to support our union's PAC in 2011. Defending the legislative gains in pilot standards/licensing requirements and flight-time/duty-time regulations will require our fullest financial support. Get in this game!

Through our organizing and Professional Development Group structure, we can see a bright future on the horizon. I was privileged to welcome seven new pilot groups into ALPA, and with several organizing drives under way in the U.S. and Canada, I am positive that we will have more pilot groups join us and continue to strengthen our union. In addition, our efforts to meet and assist pilots in colleges, universities,

**We must not let anyone destroy our pride and respect for our profession. Look at that other airline pilot in the terminal or in the cockpit on your next deadhead and know that he or she has worked just as hard as you to get there. If we treat each other with respect and work for the good of the airline piloting profession, no management will ever break our union.**

and the armed services will help them as they prepare for airline careers and help all of us secure our profession.

There is an old saying about all politics being local, and there certainly is a corollary within our union. Many decisions are local, and electing your local council rep is one of the most important opportunities you have within your union. *I certainly hope more of our members become involved in local ALPA work, but I won't kid you: it's not easy.* Your reps make important decisions on your behalf—that's why you elected them. And they accept the hard work and many challenges of trying to get our members on the same page. The airline industry, your peers at other airlines, and your management will judge your pilot group by those you choose to represent you.

One of the most important traits a union member can have, and should demand from his or her reps, is empathy. The collective understanding of what it's like to be furloughed or how to face retirement with a decimated pension is a true test of the unity and solidarity of any pilot group. Decision-

making in the cockpit is much different from making decisions at your local council and master executive council meetings. Democracy doesn't work on the flight deck; but in union meetings, it's the best, yet hardest form, of union government. Without consensus, you will have no unity and therefore little power. *Without reservation, I fully support our incoming national officers and ask you to provide them with your solidarity to lead ALPA into our ninth decade.*

Sometimes we blame other pilots for what has happened to our own careers and for decisions that management makes. Sometimes we even blame other pilots for flying airplanes we gave up the right to fly, which leads to blaming those reps and the pilot group that made that decision. Then the isolationist's refrain of "let's all separate into our own unions" begins. Well, I say "bull." We must all respect members of our own profession. If we place our family in the back of another pilot's airplane, then we want and need that pilot to be in our union. It's really that simple.

The time is right to make significant gains at the bargaining table—but we will miss the opportunity if we blame other pilots instead of focusing on how we can help them while we help ourselves. This is another lesson we've learned, and our union has changed to meet the challenges of the deregulated airline system structure. This includes close cooperation among ALPA leaders whose companies create an airline system by employing a coordinated bargaining pattern while addressing career progression and furlough protections among partner airlines.

Airline pilots are truly special. Yet many either no longer feel that way or just don't believe it anymore. The dedication and commitment needed to become a professional airline pilot is something few will ever attain. As we approach the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, we must not allow the size of our paychecks or our intense frustrations to be the measure of our worth as professional pilots.

We must not let anyone destroy our pride and respect for our profession. Look at that other airline pilot in the terminal or in the cockpit on your next deadhead and know that he or she has worked just as hard as you to get there. If we treat each other with respect and work for the good of the airline piloting profession, no management will ever break our union.

It has truly been an honor and privilege to serve as your union president. I look forward to seeing you on the line—flight or picket.

