

New Year, New Opportunities



By Capt. John Prater, ALPA President



Though filled with several disappointing and a few disastrous moments, 2009 proved to be a year of positive change for our industry and our union. Specifically, we are now working with a U.S. government that is no longer threatened by labor, but instead engages union leaders when searching for solutions.

Whether it's high-profile events like acts of terrorism, accidents or incidents, health-care costs, or issues closer to home like flight-time/duty-time limits, lithium battery rules, Open Skies, or outsourcing, ALPA representatives have regularly consulted and advised our governments at all levels, including the White House. While all are important issues, I believe that bargaining and our contracts must take center stage, which has been my focus. In just one year, the Obama administration has set a new tone for managements that have grown accustomed to stalling negotiations, devastating our contracts, and "winning" in bankruptcy courts.

During most of the past decade, pilots had to fight for their pensions and their livelihoods. Labor faced insurmountable obstacles and roadblocks—management, government, and the courts. Negotiating and enforcing contracts under the Railway Labor Act (RLA) was perhaps the most distressing area. We fought management delays in negotiations, frustratingly slow processes for contract enforcement, bankruptcy courts eager to take management's side, and government agencies that lost their commitment to the fair and balanced treatment of all parties. And this included the application of the RLA and the workings of the National Mediation Board (NMB).

The RLA mediation process only works with fair and equal treatment of both bargaining parties, and bargaining is enhanced when both parties are uncertain about what action the NMB may take. After meeting with the NMB this past year, I believe all three Board members are committed to efficiently concluding negotiations by ensuring that both parties bargain in good faith. The Board clearly thinks that, under the RLA, bargaining parties who fail to act responsibly should be met with consequences. While these broad principles take us in the right direction, there is always room for improvement.

Answering one of the calls to action in ALPA's strategic plan, which our Board of Directors developed in 2008, ALPA representatives met with a committee of experts that the NMB established to review possible improvements to the RLA mediation process. With six of our pilot groups in NMB mediation, and requests to be released from mediation filed

with the NMB, these are critical issues. During meetings with the NMB-appointed committee, ALPA raised issues and made recommendations related to delays pilots encounter in mediation, the failure of the NMB to use the full range of tools available to motivate bargaining parties to conclude contracts, and additional process changes authorized by the RLA. This committee will provide its recommendations to the NMB in the next few months.

To augment ALPA's efforts, I appointed a Railway Labor Act Study Group, following discussions with the Executive Council and Board, to analyze the RLA and find areas that could be improved to benefit ALPA pilots. To read more about the RLA, see the article on page 12 of this issue. While we're pleased that the new NMB is serious about change—

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and has already initiated measures to deal with several mediation and representation issues like those described above and updating the 75-year-old antiquated and unfair voting procedures regarding union elections (see page 60)—other pressing issues will need to be addressed in the legislative and regulatory arenas, through collective bargaining, in the courts, or with the administration.

With nearly half of ALPA members in Section 6 contract negotiations this year, and several Canadian pilot groups deep into bargaining (see the special section beginning on page 14), I'm optimistic due to the recently negotiated Delta/Northwest contract and the positive outcomes of Section 6 bargaining at Alaska, Island Air, and Hawaiian. This NMB has sent a signal to all comers: it means business! Between government initiatives that ensure a level playing field for *both* bargaining parties and the resources from your union, ALPA pilots should know that with collective support, we will climb the negotiations ladder together to achieve a better quality of life for all.

In this New Year, I hope that every ALPA leader and member will dedicate themselves to the principles of our Code of Ethics and to our union's collective strength. This is the only way we can say—We Are ALPA.