

# CommutAir

## Coping With Change

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**P**reparing to reopen contract negotiations and adapting to the FAA's new first officer qualification and training rules are high on the CommutAir pilots' 2014 to-do list.

With the implementation of the new rules, the United Express carrier has had to fundamentally change how it does business with its pilots regarding hiring, training, and scheduling. Retaining qualified pilots, already a challenge at entry-level airlines like CommutAir, is also becoming increasingly difficult as the mainline carriers ramp up their hiring.

"As the industry has adapted, we've adapted as well to make sure that our pilots remain professionally qualified, properly trained, and in compliance with all the new FAA regulations," says Capt. John Bassett, the pilots' Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman.

"We recognized right away that some of our newer first officers were in danger of being grounded when the 1,500-hour rule took effect, so we negotiated a short-term letter of agreement that allowed our lower-time pilots to gain extra hours so that they could build time quickly," Bassett says. "We were able to qualify every one of our pilots before the August deadline."

Like other carriers, CommutAir is also coping with the implementation of the new FAR Part 117 flight- and duty-time rules. The new rule is partially responsible for the company's decision to

abandon its old pencil-and-paper scheduling method in favor of an electronic preferential bidding system (PBS).

After discussing the possible pros and cons of a potential PBS for a number of months, ALPA leaders were prepared when management announced it would implement PBS in early 2014. A PBS letter of agreement was negotiated in short order that will include a number of improvements for CommutAir pilots.

A major goal for the pilots in 2014 is preparing to reopen contract negotiations. They ratified their first-ever ALPA contract in late 2011, and the four-year deal becomes amendable in 2015. While the 2011 contract greatly improved pilot pay and work rules, the group still lags behind some of its peers, and moving nearer to the industry standard remains a priority.

One ongoing item of concern is unlikely to change: the constant turnover of line pilots and union leaders as members accrue enough time and experience to move on to larger carriers. In the past year, the MEC has seen a string of elected representatives and key committee chairmen leave the airline for JetBlue, US Airways, Compass, and elsewhere.

Recognizing that the tougher FAA training and flight-hour requirements may make it harder to find new hires, CommutAir has entered into agreements with several flight school programs in Ohio and Florida to ensure a steady stream of incoming first officers. Students who graduate from these programs and meet hiring standards have

a direct pathway to the right seat of a CommutAir Dash 8.

"We realize that CommutAir is only a transitional job for most of us here, and it's exciting and rewarding to see our friends



**Former Vice Chairman F/O Tom Bishop, who left CommutAir in November 2013 to fly for Compass Airlines.**

move on to bigger and better things," Bassett acknowledges. "But before they leave, our mission is to make our outgoing pilots not just professional aviators but dedicated union members as well."

Privately held with just 21 Dash 8-Q200/300 turboprops and a little more than 200 pilots, CommutAir is among the smallest airlines in the United Express system. It also is among a handful of regional airlines whose fortunes are tied to a single mainline partner: first Continental and now United. But the carrier continues to occupy a profitable niche in the United system, flying to smaller destinations ringing United's CLE, EWR, and IAD hubs at a lower cost than larger competitors flying regional jets can offer. Recognizing the airline's value, in 2013 United renewed its capacity-purchase agreement with CommutAir for another five years. 

### CMT a Glance

**Founded:** 1989

**Number of pilots:**  
Approximately 210

**Pilots joined ALPA:** 2008

**Headquarters:** South Burlington, Vt., with an operations headquarters in North Olmsted, Ohio

**Pilot bases:** Cleveland, Ohio; Newark, N.J.; and Dulles, Va.

**Operations:** CommutAir flies to more than 27 cities in 14 U.S. states and Canadian provinces under a capacity-purchase agreement with United Airlines

**Fleet:** 16 37-seat Dash 8-Q200s and 5 50-seat Dash 8-Q300s