

Sun Country

Pilots Determined to Negotiate Contract Improvements

By John Perkinson
Staff Writer

The Sun Country pilots are prepared for whatever it takes to negotiate a new labor agreement. After several years of Section 6 negotiations, the new Sun Country owners and management still show little interest in completing an agreement

that results in compensation, benefits, and work rules commensurate with Sun Country pilot experience and training. And as yet, company offers are

not comparable to what pilot peers earn at other airlines.

"This pilot group continues to be highly unified and highly motivated," says Capt. Dennis Vanatta, the pilots' Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman, noting that "what progress we are making is due in large part to our pilots' solidarity and determination. Despite the duration of these negotiations, the pilots remain unwaveringly focused on their very reasonable goal of reaching parity with the other B-737 pilots in the U.S."

During 2013, the pilot negotiating team met with management under the guidance of a National Mediation Board mediator an average of a week per month, but any progress at the bargaining table has been made "in fits and starts," as Vanatta describes it. "Most of the

sections are either tentatively agreed to or should be very close to resolution at this point, and we are hoping to close up the nonmonetary open issues very soon. But the company hasn't shown any willingness to address the pilots' most important issues—pay and retirement," he says.

Sun Country's pay rates remain firmly at the bottom of the U.S. airline industry, despite the fact that Sun Country is profitable and growing. Vanatta notes that "all available financial data clearly show a company that is eminently profitable and has the ability to compensate its pilots on par with the rest of the industry." The airline has been steadily growing, adding airplanes and hiring pilots, and plans to continue hiring through the foreseeable future.

Sun Country's economic outlook wasn't always so rosy. Contract talks began while the airline was in bankruptcy. Rising fuel costs and an owner who was caught in an elaborate Ponzi scheme prompted the airline to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in April 2008. Sun Country remained in bankruptcy until February 2011 but has been profitable since then.

Despite the airline's positive financial changes, and previous concessions taken by the pilots to help the company through difficult times, labor relations with the new management continue to be less constructive than the pilots would like. Management contract compliance has been an ongoing concern, and the

MEC Grievance Committee continues to be busy handling pilot grievances.

The pilots' Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA) program, a nonpunitive reporting system for collecting flight information used to improve operational safety, is another example of company noncompliance. The FOQA program was suspended several months ago due to the company violating the agreement. The pilots hope, however, that recent meetings will result in their FOQA program being reanimated soon. They point to the continuing operation of their Aviation Safety Action Program as a demonstration of what they can accomplish when pilots and management work together.

The MEC is seeking additional mediated negotiating sessions in 2014 to conclude these protracted talks and bring the pilots the collective bargaining agreement they deserve. However, Vanatta says that the pilots have already waited too long. "We're sitting at the bottom of the industry in terms of pay and retirement, and we're bound and determined to fix it with this contract." And with their continued unity and determination, the Sun Country pilots can make it happen.

Sun Country offers scheduled service mostly in the form of point-to-point flights from its Minneapolis, Minn., hub to its 32 destinations, including a number of seasonal destinations. The airline also provides ad hoc charter work with its fleet of B-737-700s and -800s. 



An evening shot of a Sun Country B-737 NG.

SCA at a Glance

Pilots joined ALPA: 1996

Founded: 1982

Number of pilots: 209

Pilot base: Minneapolis—St. Paul International Airport

Operations: Based in Mendota Heights, Minn., Sun Country flies scheduled service to 32 destinations. The airline also operates charter flights to numerous locations in the United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, and overseas. The airline also operates military charter flights and is a member of the U.S. Department of Defense's Civil Reserve Air Fleet.

Fleet: 17 B-737 NGs