

AirTran

New Year's Resolution: New Contract

By **Toni C. Vacinek**, ALPA Communications Specialist



AirTran pilots have been negotiating for a new contract since 2004. Several picketing events, including this one in Atlanta, and other SPSC events were held during the summer and fall in an effort to move the process forward.

ATN at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 2009
Number of Pilots: 1,600+
Pilot Domicile: Atlanta, Ga.
Headquarters: Orlando, Fla.
Operations/Services: Founded in 1992, AirTran Airways is one of America's largest low-cost airlines and offers quality jet service with more than 700 daily flights to 69 destinations. AirTran Airways is the second largest carrier at the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, and has major operations in Baltimore, Md.; Milwaukee, Wisc.; and Orlando, Fla.
Fleet: 86 B-717s, 52 B-737s

For the pilots of AirTran Airways, May 1, 2009, was the start of a new year and a new beginning. In the same manner that one would shout "Happy New Year" each January 1, the pilots of AirTran Airways resoundingly exclaimed, "We Are ALPA" on May 1, 2009. Formerly represented by an independent union, the National Pilots Association (NPA), the 1,631 pilots of AirTran Airways have joined together as brothers and sisters in the Air Line Pilots Association while continuing the fight for better work rules, fair wages, and most importantly, quality of life.

After contract negotiations lasting 4 years, and negotiations seemingly at a halt, merger discussions between ALPA and the NPA began in January 2009. A merger agreement was sent

out for ratification in March 2009, and on April 10, 2009, the vote closed, with more than 87 percent of the pilots who cast ballots voting in favor of ratifying the proposed merger agreement between ALPA and the NPA. The determination of the AirTran pilots to negotiate a fair contract and improved working conditions led to the campaign to join ALPA. That same determination will result in a new contract in 2010.

"The 88 percent vote in favor of the merger is almost as impressive as the fact that 94 percent of the pilots voted," said Capt. John Prater, ALPA's president, while addressing ALPA's Executive Council and welcoming the then NPA Board of Directors. "It speaks volumes about your members and their commitment to a brighter future."

Awarded a \$5 million grant from ALPA's Major Contingency Fund for strategic planning and strike preparedness, AirTran pilots ramped up their efforts and conducted five informational picketing events in less than one year. On August 6, they conducted informational picketing to commemorate 5 years of contract negotiations on a contract that became amendable in May 2005.

Additional ALPA resources have allowed AirTran union leaders to significantly diminish an immense backlog of grievances that has accumulated over the

years—one of the key reasons, along with collective bargaining resources, that the pilots sought alternate union representation. They have been able to secure an increased number of negotiating dates and have enhanced communications among the group while working toward a new collective bargaining agreement.

Informed Pilot-to-Pilot® volunteers maintain a steady stream of communication on the line, while updates on negotiations and strategic preparedness are disseminated through a range of communication vehicles, including newsletters and electronic updates. Although negotiations are progressing, management continues to instigate unnecessary setbacks by targeting individual pilots.

In a Thanksgiving message to the pilots, F/O Linden Hillman, the Master Executive Council chairman, said, "We should be thankful that AirTran is strong, and hope that our corporate officers will finally recognize that they should fight for their company and not against their employees." He added, "We should also be thankful that our hard work has helped make AirTran the successful enterprise it has become."

The pilots' Negotiating Committee, with guidance from the MEC, continues to work on garnering an industry-standard contract equal to that of those flying similar-sized aircraft at other major airlines. Not only has AirTran management set up obstacles along the way, it has tried to limit the pilots' support of their union. Yet, AirTran pilots have united and proved to management that they can transcend any obstacles, including layoffs, displacements, firings, suspensions, and threatened discipline for displaying the ALPA logo on their person while in uniform.

Despite the dismal economy, AirTran remained profitable in 2009, making some of the highest quarterly profits in the company's history, and the airline is expected to be even more successful in 2010.

In late 2006, Barack Obama said, "We have to acknowledge the progress we made, but understand that we still have a long way to go. That things are better, but still not good enough." That could easily describe AirTran under ALPA. Things are better and improving every day. ☺