

For the 127 pilots of CommutAir, 2009 was certainly a busy year. They essentially built their organization from the bottom up while also entering negotiations on their first contract and dealing with the aftereffects of their partner airline Colgan's Dash 8 crash in Buffalo.

## CommutAir

### CommutAir Pilots Await Growth as They Build Their Union

By Rusty Ayers, ALPA Senior Communications Specialist



PHOTOS BY F/O ALAN KONOPKA (COMMUTAIR)

**Capt. Sebastien Barone and F/O Don Rhoads arrive in Cleveland.**

### CMT at a Glance

**Pilots Joined ALPA:** 2008

**Number of Pilots:** 127

**Services:** A Continental Connection carrier since 2000, CommutAir provides scheduled service to 21 cities in 9 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada.

The airline has hubs at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and Newark Liberty International Airport

**Fleet:** 16 Bombardier Dash 8-Q200s

The Continental Connection carrier's pilots joined ALPA in June 2008

after they realized they would be better protected and enjoy a closer relationship with the other pilot groups in the Continental system if they joined ALPA.

The newly elected officers hit the ground running, integrating themselves into the Association's structure and attending as many national gatherings as possible. CMT leaders and volunteers were prominent at ALPA's Leadership Conference, IT Conference, Secretary-Treasurer's Conference, Fee-for-Departure-Carrier MEC Summit, and Executive Board meetings.

"It's been like drinking from a fire hose at times, but we built a union in a year—with a lot of help," says Capt. Shawn Marcin, the pilots' Master Executive Council chairman. "We've set up all the committees we've deemed necessary and have created all the structures. We've just seen many volunteers come forward to help us set up the shell to where we are now, and it's all going very well."

The first two committees the MEC was able to fully staff were Negotiations and Scheduling. But the group also has volunteers in place doing Safety, Security, Communications, Pilot Assistance, Retirement & Insurance, and Jumpseat work as well. Some Committees, such as Hotels and Grievance, won't be needed until the pilots have a contract.

CommutAir pilots opened negotiations with management in February 2009 and have worked at a fast clip since then, tentatively agreeing to 10 of 31 contract sections. The ALPA team has presented all but two of its openers to management, including the pay, benefits, and R&I sections.

"I think we're on a good pace. We've gone from nothing to having almost everything proposed, and we're in a holding pattern right now, waiting to

hear back from management on our proposals," Marcin says. "I don't want to make any promises, but if the pace continues and both sides stay on task, I think this time next year we can sit down and say 'here's our contract.'"

Most CMT pilots would agree that one of the biggest items they would like to see resolved in their first contract is scheduling. The opening of a new base in Newark, N.J., last fall forced many pilots formerly based in Cleveland, Ohio, to become commuters. The lack of commutable lines and the limited number of pilots available to fly has put a significant strain on the system.

The MEC Scheduling Committee hasn't waited for a new contract to help its fellow pilots' quality of life. The Committee convinced management to buy new computer software to replace the old, inefficient pencil-and-paper method of trip construction. The ALPA volunteers have been trained on the new scheduling system and are looking forward to helping build more pilot-friendly lines.

Marcin and his fellow Council 152 officers were elected to new 3-year terms in November. They are looking forward to 2010 as the year they wrap up contract negotiations, and will work on building a strategic plan, including close collaboration with ALPA's Fee-for-Departure group.

The CommutAir MEC has reached out to strengthen its relationship with the Continental MEC and the pilots of fellow CAL feeders, ExpressJet and Colgan Air. The Cleveland councils of CMT, XJT, and CAL pilots met in a first-ever "CLE Council Summit" in December.

Having avoided a threatened round of furloughs last winter, the future now looks bright for the pilots as the airline has begun hiring again. The signs also indicate that CommutAir could be acquiring new aircraft in the near future, fueling continued growth in the pilot group. Whatever happens, the CMT pilots are prepared.

"The main thing is to not let our progress bog down. It's in both the pilot group's and management's interest to successfully conclude negotiations, and we'll take the steps necessary to improve our position and help the company grow," Marcin concludes. 🌐