

Change is in the air at Canadian carrier First Air, where new aircraft, new management, and upcoming collective bargaining negotiations will challenge the pilot group in 2010.

First Air, an airline wholly owned by the Makivik Corporation, flies to a number of communities in the Canadian Arctic.

First Air cockpit crewmembers joined ALPA in 2008, in the middle of a 4-year contract that's set to end December 2010. Even though contract talks haven't begun yet, Capt. Jamie Biggs, the pilots' Master Executive Council chairman, says the 154 pilots and flight engineers of "The Airline of the North" are already enjoying the advantages of ALPA.

"We came from an 'in house' association where all the work was shouldered by a very select few, and 99.9 percent of that work was strictly labour relations, but after joining ALPA we became a team," Biggs explains.

"There are a lot more people involved, and while the labour relations aspect is still a major role, we have established several committees working for our members on multiple levels. It is very obvious that joining ALPA was a brilliant step for us, and everyone is enjoying the benefits."

One major benefit the crewmembers now enjoy is jumpseat access. FAB's new Jumpseat Committee has successfully concluded more than 10 reciprocal agreements with a number of carriers, including Air Canada Jazz, Air Transat, Bearskin, Hawaiian, Mesaba, and United, enabling crewmembers who live on the east and west coasts to commute to their northern bases, greatly improving their quality of life.

The new jumpseat agreements are an example of the improved relations the FAB group has had with management since First Air replaced its senior management personnel more than a year ago. Instead of arguing with its labor groups, the new management team has taken a collaborative approach that should make upcoming contract negotiations easier, according to Biggs.

"Overall, it has been very positive. We are enjoying a good working relationship and while things get tough sometimes,

there is an attitude of fair play and at the end of the day handshakes prevail. The professionalism on both sides is refreshing," he says.


In preparation for the upcoming contract talks, the FAB MEC has already appointed its negotiators, who will be trained by the Association later this year. The leaders have also begun polling members to learn their contract priorities.

"We're optimistic that although negotiations will be tough, the results will be positive. We feel our existing contract is where it should be, and our main goal will be to clean up existing language and to modernize," Biggs declares.

The major contract change in 2009 was a letter of agreement that allowed the airline to acquire a new B-767-200 freighter to replace one of its aging B-727 freighters. The new B-767 was the first of what's expected to be several more fleet upgrades in the next few years, as work moves forward to replace some of the carrier's B-737-200s with newer B-737-500s and establish a training regime to transition pilots to the new aircraft. Not all of First Air's -200s will be leaving, however, because some will still be needed for their ability to operate on gravel runways, one of the many characteristics unique to operations in the high Arctic regions.

Another successful initiative with management has been the introduction of a Safety Management System (SMS) at the airline. While SMS programs have been somewhat controversial in the Canadian news media, the increased focus on safety has been a commercial and financial win, especially with the mining and exploration companies that make up a major portion of First Air's charter business.

There are some dark clouds on the horizon, however. Air Canada and WestJet recently began service to Yellowknife, and Air Canada will extend service into Iqaluit this spring. Both northern destinations have traditionally been served exclusively by First Air and another airline.

While the competition from these far larger carriers will have an impact, customer loyalty, combined with the training and experience of the First Air crews, should win the day. 

## First Air

### First Air: Focused On the Future

By Rusty Ayers, ALPA Senior Communications Specialist



F/E Jeremy Studney with one of the First Air Hercules freighters.

## FAB at a Glance

**Pilots Joined ALPA:** 2008

**Number of Crewmembers:** 154

**Headquarters:** Kanata, Ont.

**Pilot Bases:** Edmonton, Alb.; Ottawa, Ont.; Yellowknife, NT; and Iqaluit, NU

**Fleet:** 1 B-767-200F, 6 B-737-200s (four in combi configuration for cargo), 1 B-727-200 (combi), 2 L-382G Hercules freighters, 8 ATR 42-300s (all combi), 1 HS 748 (combi)