

Ryan

Ryan International Airlines: Succeeding In Spite of Itself

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Capt. Duane Muckey starts a descent into Spain.

RYN at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 1998

Number of Pilots: 135 active (109 on furlough)

Pilot Domicile: Rockford, Ill. (RFD)

Headquarters: Rockford, Ill.

Services: Ryan International (not to be confused with Irish RyanAir) provides scheduled and charter services for customers around the world, including substantial flying for the U.S. Department of Defense

Fleet: 1 B-757 ETOPS, 2 B-767-300 non-ETOPS, 3 B-767-300ERS, 1 MD-80

At some airlines, management has found ways to work collaboratively with its flight crews, finding innovative methods to cut costs while honoring contract obligations. And then there are carriers like Ryan International Airlines, where pilots have to fight tooth and nail to make even small gains.

Pilots at Ryan say 2009 was one of their more challenging years yet regarding working conditions and general treatment. But they still were able to better their situation despite management fighting them every step of the way thanks to improvements built into their 2008 contract.

"In terms of pay and benefits, we've made significant progress toward digging out of the financial hole our previous contract put us in, because each subsequent year of our agreement gives us a larger step toward closing the gap," says Capt. Erik Sparks, the Master Executive Council chairman. "Unfortunately, we are also on pace for a record number of grievances and have participated in a number of arbitrations."

The pilot group has had a successful track record in defending both its contract and members facing unwarranted company discipline, with the biggest victory in 2009 coming when the union restored the jobs of two RYN pilots who were wrongfully terminated after a B-757 tail strike incident in Bolivia. An arbitration ruling in the captain's case overturned his termination, while management settled with the first officer shortly thereafter, rescinding his termination.

The MEC has settled a large number of other grievances that resulted in substantial gains for the pilot group, including monetary awards to several pilots who had been furloughed out of seniority. The group also signed a letter of agreement that instituted a straight 1 hour of pay for 2 hours of duty rig, something the pilots had fought for but had been unable to achieve in contract negotiations.

Despite these wins, Sparks says Ryan's compliance with the new contract seems to worsen as time progresses. Relations between the pilot group and CEO Mike McCabe are "nonexistent," even though McCabe promised at the start of 2009

to work with the union to change the airline's anti-labor corporate culture.

"There seems to be no end to the contract violations we face each week. In several cases, management is violating sections of the contract for which it had previously signed cease-and-desist letters, after facing prior grievances on that very section of the contract. Given the choice, management will violate the contract first, rather than approaching the union to deal with challenging situations that might arise," Sparks reports.

Based in Rockford, Ill., Ryan is wholly owned by commercial real estate company Rubloff Development Group. Because the airline is privately held, union leaders say it's difficult to track the company's finances, but they believe Ryan is making substantial profits that Rubloff has used to prop up its sagging real estate portfolio.

The airline's primary focus is flying troops and dependents worldwide for the U.S. Department of Defense, although its B-757/767 fleet is occasionally used for non-government charters. RYN's remaining MD-80, once part of a fleet that operated "Con Air" flights transporting federal prisoners, has now transitioned to ad hoc charter work after the company lost its contract with the U.S. Department of Justice.

Ryan International management has boosted its profits by understaffing the airline for much of 2009, keeping the carrier's many furloughees in the unemployment line for far too long and undermining the quality of life for the pilots who remain working. But staffing is on an upward trend, with the airline recalling several dozen furloughed pilots and posting more vacancies in the coming weeks.

With Department of Defense flying projected to remain a stable source of income for the next few years, Ryan is expanding its fleet, with current plans calling for additional B-767-300ERS, with rumors of possibly adding a new type in 2010.

"If the company's recently stated expectations come to fruition, all of our furloughed pilots should be back at work this year," says Sparks. "We can only imagine how much stronger the airline could be if our management was willing to work with us." 🌐