

## Spirit

### Spirit Continues Along Path Toward Possible Strike

By Jen Lofquist, ALPA Communications Specialist



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## SPA at a Glance

**Pilots Joined ALPA:** 1996  
**Number of Pilots:** 519  
**Headquarters:** Miramar, Fla.  
**Pilot Domiciles:** Atlantic City, N.J.; Detroit, Mich.; Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.  
**Fleet:** 27 A319s, 2 A321s

Spirit Airlines management has never been known for its reluctance to cause headlines, obviously buying into the motto, "There's no such thing as bad publicity." In one recent example, management drew news media attention when it produced a web ad in early December 2009 promoting an "Eye of the Tiger" fare sale—days after Tiger Woods crashed his vehicle in Florida and let loose a news media storm. The ad shows a tiger behind the wheel of an SUV that has crashed into a fire hydrant. Management demonstrates similar judgment and taste in its approach to labor relations—and it just might lead to the headline: "Spirit Pilots on Strike."

In November 2009, after more than 3 years of fits and starts in negotiations, numerous grievances, and a lawsuit, Spirit pilots asked the National Mediation Board (NMB) for a proffer of arbitration. The NMB's decision is expected in early 2010, and the pilots have been stepping up communications and events to prepare for the outcome.

The unity this group has demonstrated over the course of negotiations is built on an active communications program that includes biweekly updates, negotiation briefings, and monthly Strategic Preparedness and Strike Committee meetings in Detroit, Mich., Atlantic City, N.J., and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. In addition to the usual modes of communication, the pilots' Master Executive Council has also used Twitter (a site that uses short message service [SMS] to broadcast information), a public website, and text messaging to cell phones to get the word out.

Earlier, in May 2009, nearly 95 percent of the eligible pilots responded to a ballot to authorize the MEC to call for a lawful withdrawal of services if stalled negotiations do not result in a contract. Of the 95 percent who voted, 98 percent voted to support the MEC. Within weeks, the pilots plastered their crew bags with "98%" stickers—sending a clear message to management that they stood with their MEC and were prepared to strike.

"If this management put even half as much effort into trying to negotiate a fair agreement for its pilots as it did in developing crude advertising, we would have a new contract," commented Capt. Sean Creed, the pilots' MEC chairman, in

response to the vote. "This vote clearly shows that this pilot group is completely fed up with this approach and is now prepared to do whatever it takes to get the fair contract we deserve."

The vote came within months of management's most notorious proposal to date. In January 2009, after 2½ years of negotiations and ignoring 30 different tentative agreements reached in that time, Spirit management put forward a new contract proposal that asked for a staggering \$5.8 million in concessions. To add insult to injury, management's proposal came right after the airline announced plans to expand service in the Caribbean and the U.S.

Creed responded at the time, "Management has repeatedly asked the pilot group to fund its blunders and now wants us to finance its expansions. We want this company to succeed and grow, but not at the cost of our families and our careers."

While fighting for a new contract, the pilots have also been battling management's attempts to worm out of the current one. When the pilots negotiated the current contract, they gave up a number of key demands to retain the contractual protection of at least 4 days off between scheduled trips. Many Spirit pilots commute to bases in Fort Lauderdale and Detroit, and these days off give them time to recoup, rest, and spend time with their families.

However, in August 2008 management began scheduling pilots with as little as 2 days between trips to shore up staffing shortfalls. The pilots immediately filed a grievance. In March 2009, an arbitration panel found in favor of the pilot group and ordered Spirit management to abide by the agreement. After 9 months, the pilots were finally given back what never should have been taken from them in the first place.

Despite the full-court press from the pilot group, management continues to drag its feet at the negotiating table, seemingly hoping that the pilots are bluffing. But these pilots show no signs of backing down from their demands for a contract that reflects and rewards their contributions to the airline.

In fact, the pilots seem more than ready to make some headlines of their own. 🌐