

Over the past year, the ExpressJet pilots have dealt with changes in every aspect of their operation, including the departure of respected managers, the appointment of a new CEO,

understaffing, and—most notably—a merger with another airline. In the face

of these challenges, the pilots remain focused on achieving an enhanced contract that will provide them with job security and career growth, even if they will soon be wearing different uniforms.

In early 2010, ExpressJet

became clear that Hanley was more focused on cutting costs and restructuring the airline to prepare the company for a possible sale or merger than on growing the airline internally.

“Somewhere along the way, ExpressJet lost its viable business plan and forgot the vital role that pilots play in the overall success of an airline,” says Capt. Chris Cashmareck, the pilots’ Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. “Despite these challenges, our pilots continue to deliver outstanding results for our partners and provide our passengers with the exceptional service they have come to expect on our flights.”

Pilot staffing levels soon became a major issue. Instead of working with the pilots on a staffing solution as had successfully been done in the past, management ignored the MEC’s repeated attempts to help solve the problem. As the airline struggled to have enough pilots to fly the routes, contract violations began to mount. In 2010, the number of grievances hit an all-time high of more than 100 open issues.

Management dragged its feet on setting arbitration dates to resolve the grievances—until the MEC threatened management with legal action.

On Aug. 4, 2010, the landscape changed again. SkyWest Holdings, Inc., announced its intention to buy ExpressJet Airlines and merge it with Atlantic Southeast Airlines, making it the largest regional airline in the world with approximately 4,300 pilots.

The ExpressJet MEC spent several weeks reviewing and evaluating the proposed transaction with legal counsel, subject-matter experts, and professional staff. The pilots

informed management what was needed to ensure pilot support: a profitable airline that provides long-term stability and progressive career potential for the pilots, fully complying with the pilots’ scope and successorship provisions, a joint collective bargaining agreement that benefits all pilots, and a fair and equitable seniority list integration.

The corporate close of the merger was completed in November. Now officially under the Atlantic Southeast umbrella, the ExpressJet pilots have begun to collect on the promises that Atlantic Southeast management made to them. The majority of grievances have been closed, and the staffing situation has been resolved. However, MEC leaders continue to closely monitor staffing to ensure that it meets the pilots’ needs and those of the operation. On another positive note, all of ExpressJet’s furloughed pilots were recalled in 2010, and management anticipates hiring 96 pilots during the first quarter of 2011.

As the merger continues to progress, the ExpressJet pilots find themselves in familiar territory. They are ready to move forward into Section 6 negotiations and to improve their contract—but this time, they are joined by their fellow Atlantic Southeast pilots.

“We may be two pilot groups, but we are one union with one vision and one goal,” says Cashmareck. “It will take the strength, courage, and determination of all 4,300 pilots of the new Atlantic Southeast working in unison to make the necessary improvements to our contract and fully realize the benefits of this merger.”

ExpressJet

Pilots Turning Challenges into Opportunities

By Lydia Jakub
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Capt. Chris Belcastro, left, Capt. Mark Wapenaar, and other ExpressJet pilots (not pictured) participate in a Labor Day parade in Cleveland, Ohio.

pilots were ready for Section 6 negotiations to improve their contract. Building on their past contract gains, the pilots had every reason to believe that negotiations would go as planned. Instead, they found themselves in a fierce battle with management. In just one year, the cooperative labor-management relationship built with the company’s former president and CEO, Jim Ream, who retired in 2009, had disappeared.

In April, Tom Hanley was named ExpressJet’s new CEO and immediately gave the pilots a sense that stable leadership had returned to the company. This sense of stability died quickly when it

XJT at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 2004
Number of Pilots: Nearly 2,600
Operations: Flies more than 40,000 passengers per day to 130 destinations in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean with approximately 1,100 departures daily
Pilot Bases: Chicago, Ill.; Cleveland, Ohio; Houston, Tex.; Newark, N.J.
Headquarters: Atlanta, Ga.
Fleet: 244 EMB-145 LRs and XRs