

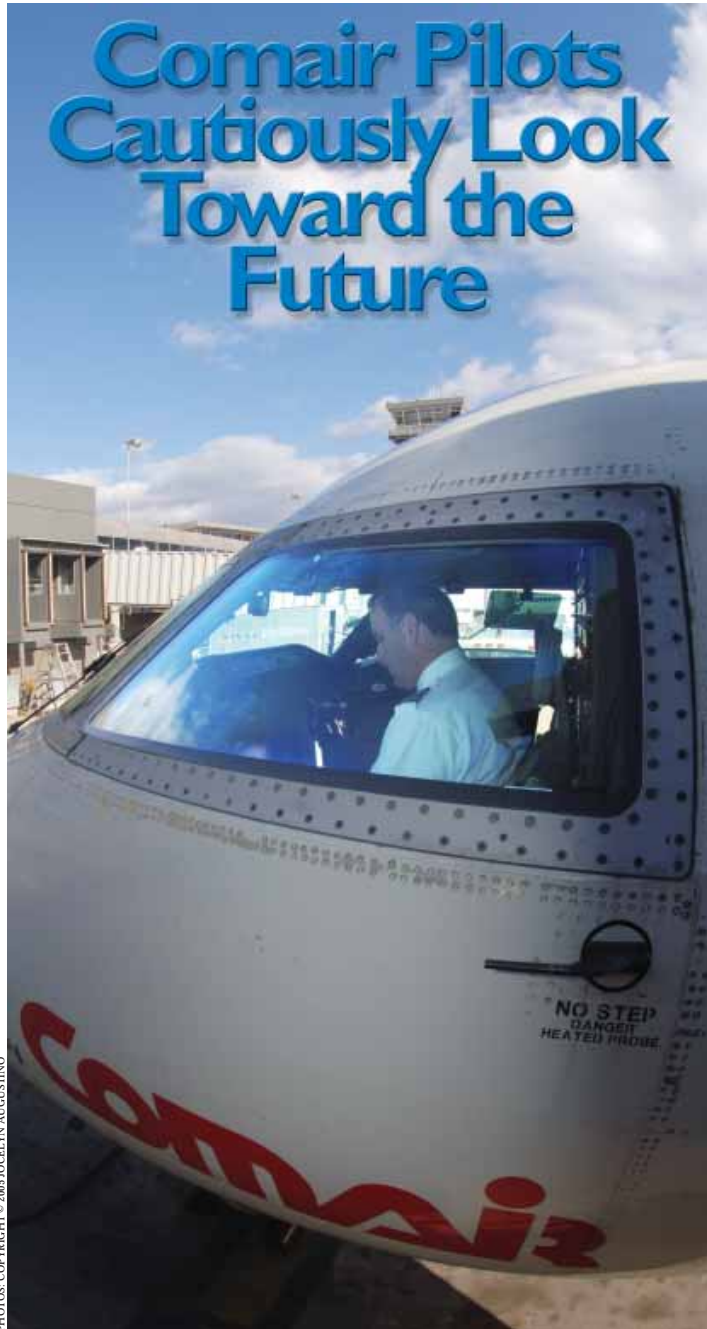


Comair pilots find themselves in a precarious position these days. The Delta Connection carrier and wholly owned subsidiary of Delta Air Lines filed for bankruptcy in September 2005, and the pilot group currently faces bankruptcy negotiations. Comair management has already indicated that it wants to amend the current pilot collective bargaining agreement. It is clear that management would like Comair's pilots to absorb large cuts in annual salary and benefits as part of the airline's plan to emerge from bankruptcy.

Capt. J.C. Lawson, chairman of the Comair pilot's Master Executive Council, says that Comair pilots don't look kindly on the prospect of having to forfeit quality from their collective bargaining agreement, but that the bankruptcy filing has made negotiations a necessity.

"After Delta filed for bankruptcy, the wheels were set in motion. We determined that it was appropriate to engage management in negotiations to defend the pilots' collective interest," says Capt. Lawson. "First and foremost, we are organized to do our level best to protect our pilots and their collective bargaining agreement, and that agreement is now under attack."

The bankruptcy comes at a time when record numbers of passengers are flying the two airlines. In 2004, Comair served approximately 12.6 million passengers. The airline provides service to 113 cities in the United States,



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Capt. Michael Ourado (Comair) runs through the checklist at Washington (D.C.) Dulles International Airport.

Canada, and the Bahamas, with 1,165 flights per day. Comair pilots fly an all-jet fleet of 174 Bombardier CRJ regional jets that include a mixture of 40-, 50-, and 70-seat versions of the aircraft. The airline recently added pilot bases in Greensboro, N.C., and at New York's JFK to its existing bases in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Orlando, Fla. The December 2005 and January 2006 schedules, however, show a reduction in flying, which drastically reduces system flying as well as the number of airplanes in revenue service.

Uncertainty is nothing new for this group of pilots. Nearly 5 years ago, Comair pilots engaged in an 89-day strike—the longest major airline strike in the last 20 years—which brought the company to a standstill and led to an agreement hailed as a benchmark labor contract.

The 2001 contract included pay raises from 13.5 percent to more than 19 percent over the first year of the contract.

It also established duty rigs, included improvements in insurance coverage, and provided for the company to contribute from 2 to 10 percent per year to a pension plan based on pilot seniority.

Reflecting back on the strike and the contract it produced, Capt. Lawson says, "Our strike was not only about improving our own lot, it was about defending our profession from those who have exploited us by dividing us into 'classes.' It was about defending the entire airline piloting

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profession, regardless of where, what, and for whom we fly. The issues we fought for are universal to pilots everywhere, and we were proud to make the gains we did.”

After the new contract was negotiated, the relationship between pilots and management changed from adversarial to joint problem-solving, including monthly meetings in which the parties resolved differences in a businesslike fashion. This relationship has evolved over the last couple of years as new management personnel have replaced some of the “old guard.” During December 2004’s computer meltdown, pilots kept the airline running despite the failure of the company’s tracking and crew-scheduling system. Over the last 2 years, the pilots and management also ramped up an aviation safety action program (ASAP).

But in 2005, the airline’s new president, Fred Buttrell, initially tried to go around the pilots’ MEC by asking the chief pilots to set up meetings between himself and small groups of pilots, all the while ignoring the MEC’s requests for a formal meeting. Buttrell’s attempt to fracture the pilot



ABOVE: F/O Karl E. Mueller (Comair) performs the initial walkaround of the airplane before departure from Dulles. LEFT: F/O Bob Johnson (Comair) preflights his Bombardier CRJ at Dulles.



group’s unity failed. After he finally—but belatedly—met with pilot leaders, it was clear that his strategy for growing Comair included renegotiating the Comair pilots’ contract.

“While we have our differences,” Capt. Lawson says, “we maintain open communications between our MEC and our CEO.”

After an intense month of proposals and counterproposals in early 2005, the MEC reached an agreement with management on a letter of agreement (LOA), which provided frozen pay rates for pilots, balanced by guaranteed fleet expansion over the next 2 years. The MEC sent this LOA out to the pilot group for membership ratification. The pilot group ratified the LOA.

Fast-forward to the present: Comair pilots are continuing negotiations in the hope of avoiding management’s filing under Section 1113 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code to

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seek a bankruptcy judge decision to void the pilot group’s contract. As Capt. Cory Tennen, vice-chairman of the Comair pilots’ MEC, sees it, the 1113 tactic is management’s “nuclear option,” which gives it the ability to “destroy pilot contracts via the bankruptcy process.”

Like collective bargaining, bankruptcy negotiations are a process. But unlike the Railway Labor Act Section 6 negotiations that led to the 2001 strike and the benchmark contract, management has the ability to initiate the court process through an 1113 motion. The risk of a court-approved rejection of the contract must always be seriously considered. For this reason, Comair pilots continue to negotiate with management rather than simply leaving the fate of their contract solely in the hands of a bankruptcy judge.

Throughout this process, Capt. Tennen insists, the MEC will ensure that management lives up to its obligations and will keep the lines of communications open with its pilots. “Bankruptcy is a road we had hoped to avoid. Now, because of management’s continued failures, they have forced it upon us. We will confront it head-on and make the best of the circumstances we face.” The objective is “maintaining an agreement that compensates the professional pilot fairly in both good times and bad.”

One example of how the MEC is making the best out of the existing circumstances is its response to the possibility of involuntary furloughs. As negotiations progressed late in 2005, management indicated that December schedule reductions would cause a projected pilot furlough. Comair pilots negotiated with management a new letter of agreement that allowed for voluntary furloughs and reduced line values. Pilot participation in this program



F/O Mueller checks under the wing of the CRJ at Washington Dulles International Airport in Virginia.

Comair Pilot Group at A Glance

Number of Pilots: 1,914

Operations: Comair operates more than 1,100 flights per day to 113 cities in the United States, Canada, and the Bahamas

Headquarters: Cincinnati, Ohio

Fleet: 174 Bombardier 40-, 50-, and 70-seat CRJ jets

Major hubs: Cincinnati; New York, N.Y. (JFK); Greensboro, N.C.; Orlando, Fla.

Customers served in 2004: 12.6 million

has been substantial. The result is that voluntary furloughs have significantly reduced the number of surplus pilots and minimized the possibility that management would invoke involuntary furloughs, which ALPA asserts would violate the February letter of agreement.

Comair pilots are striving to preserve as much of their current agreement as possible and to maintain the ability to achieve pay and benefit improvements during better times. “We don’t want to find ourselves ‘behind the power curve,’” says Capt. Lawson.

At the same time, Capt. Lawson insists that keeping the Comair pilots unified, just like they were in 2001, is essential for the pilots to get through this next chapter during these tenuous times.

“This pilot group has stood together through all of the good and bad times,” says Capt. Lawson, “and we will make it through whatever awaits us in the future.”