

WHY WIEN PILOTS ARE ON STRIKE...

Background

The current Air Line Pilots Association strike against Wien Air Alaska has generated much public interest—and regrettably, a considerable amount of misunderstanding on the part of the public, and air travelers who rely on Wien for air service. We, the Wien pilots, feel it our obligation to use this space to present the whole story as factually and as candidly as we know how.

First, it should be noted that we did not want this strike and we are anxious for a settlement so we can get back to our business of flying airplanes. We're on strike because we simply could not have a substandard contract jammed down our throats through unfair labor tactics. . . and at the same time, allow our airline to reduce the margin of safety for you, the traveling public, in the interest of saving a few dollars.

We tried earnestly to resolve the issues at the bargaining table prior to the strike, and during "eleventh hour" negotiations in Washington D.C. (under the supervision of the National Mediation Board). Presently, our negotiators, along with the national ALPA representatives are standing by waiting for an opportunity to meet with the company in an effort to get this dispute resolved. Unfortunately, the company's actions before the strike, as they continue to be now, were deliberate attempts to dictate terms of a new pilot work agreement . . . and to break the union. It's obvious to us that Wien management never intended to bargain in "good faith" to avoid this strike.

We feel that the company not only anticipated the strike, but actually encouraged it, and then planned for it. Instead of devoting its efforts to averting a strike, Wien was gearing up for a partial operation. Prior to the strike, the company placed ads in a national publication for replacement pilots. Two days before the strike deadline, two top management negotiators unexpectedly, and without prior notice, left the negotiating table in Washington D.C. They returned to Anchorage so they could fly the planes during the strike.

Further, Wien management makes no secret of its intentions to give up its bush operation, and this strike has certainly expedited this process.

Also, perhaps Wien is concerned about upcoming negotiations with the Teamsters Union, which represents flight attendants, mechanics, ticketing and reservation agents, clerical and other workers on the property. One must ask the question: Is it the company's intention to frighten these employees to capitulate in their own contract negotiations by missing paychecks now (due to a pilot strike)?

This kind of archaic management philosophy may have worked 20 years ago but it has since outlived its usefulness. Most successful corporations today realize that harmonious labor relations is one of their greatest assets—especially service oriented, labor-intensive companies as are the airlines. In many cases, this is the very reason for a company's success—a dedicated and productive work force. This is not a luxury

for employees to bask in, but a necessity for management if it is to maintain a stable, fine-tuned profit-objective operation.

Another point. There are some who think ALPA national headquarters has forced this strike because of the crew complement issue. Not so. We felt the

company's position at the bargaining table was so unrealistic that outside assistance was necessary. Thus, our 136 pilots, though small in number compared to ALPA's other 34 pilot groups asked for and received the support of the Association's 30,000 members to help resolve this dispute.

The Issues

This dispute involves the most basic elements of our contract and goes far beyond the much publicized crew complement issue. The different issues include:

***The company's "hire-fire-rehire" policy.** Wien management has engaged in a practice of hiring a new pilot then firing him just before he has completed his one-year probationary period, then rehiring him for another probationary year. Thus many pilots were working out of seniority and others didn't even have the benefit of seniority. Such a practice has been extremely crippling to the morale of the pilot group and resulted in significant pay and benefit loss to a majority of the pilots.

***Pay.** Currently, Wien pilots on the average earn about 20 % less than their counterparts in the lower 48, despite the 35 % higher cost of living in Alaska. Wien pilots are under paid by all industry standards. For example, most junior second officers earn a meager \$11,500 a year. That is not enough for a family to live on in Alaska!

(While Wien has offered a "substantial" increase to its captains, the company fails to bring first officer pay up to standard industry level. Notwithstanding higher cost of living in Alaska . . . and refuses to discuss second officer pay):

***Retirement.** Wien's pilot retirement package is at the bottom of the industry, yet the company refuses to discuss retirement until the second officer is removed from the cockpit.

***Days Off.** The company wants to be able to schedule pilots for flying on their days off. This would set the scheduling policies back twenty years. The airline also sought to take away a number of other previously negotiated benefits.

Should the Boeing 737 have two Pilots?

This is a thorny issue that Wien management feels has yet to be resolved to its satisfaction, in spite of a May, 1973 arbitration judgement clearly ruling in favor of three pilots.

Basically it is a matter of safety and dollars: a three pilot operation offers a greater margin of safety, a two-man cockpit is a little less costly. We the pilots, for obvious reasons, are very safety conscious, and seek the highest possible attainable standards of safety when it come to equipment, training, procedures, crew complement and other operational considerations. We realize, also, that these safety criteria must be consistent with the economics and reality of successful airline operations. ALPA feels that the extra cost of the third man is justified for the added level of safety he provides—especially on the Wien operation.

Unable to resolve this issue in 1972, the pilots and company by indirect negotiations, decided to submit this issue to an independent neutral arbitrator. One year later, the arbitrator, agreed to both the company and the pilots, ruled for the need of a three pilot operation on Wien's 737. Wien's argument for a 2-man crew was fully heard, and Boeing's (manufacturer of the airplane) representatives testified during the arbitration before this unbiased third-party decision was reached. It was a decision arrived at based on facts—and one that both parties were compelled to abide by under the arbitration agreement.

In the decision, the arbitrator said the extreme Alaska weather conditions weighed heavily in his conclusion that three pilots were necessary in the Wien 737. He noted that the third pilot is extremely useful in coping with snow and ice, plus the special problem of white out and that much of the flying in winter is in darkness. He also said the second officer handles a number of cockpit tasks which give the captain and first officer more freedom to concentrate on other critical flight functions, and that a third set of eyes is a special importance for surveillance of other aircraft during marginal weather conditions.

The Wien arbitration was one of the four on the Boeing 737 complement issue. Two arbitrations at United Airlines, the largest operator of the 737, ruled for three-men and the only two-man arbitration ruling was Aloha Airlines. The Hawaiian based airlines conducts most of its operations during daylight hours and in low density traffic areas with very little bad weather. We have no quarrel with the Aloha decision since an entirely different set of circumstances prevails in its operations.

Again, Boeing representatives participated actively in each of these arbitrations. Now it is interesting to note that two former employees of the airline manufacturer are training to scab on Wien's partial operation.

One final note: We know that contracts are not negotiated in the press; they are obtained in "good faith" talks in face-to-face bargaining at the table. That is why we have deliberately tried to maintain a low public profile. We have instead, concentrated our efforts on getting this dispute resolved. We have always been willing to negotiate, and are available now to meet with company representatives anywhere anytime to resume negotiations—and hopefully end the strike.

Air Line Pilots Association



Wien Pilots

Striking for
Our
Contract and

Your Safety