

## Open To Change, Committed To Solidarity

by Rene Foss

NYC Council 91



Dear Northwest Flight Attendants,

I want to tell you how much I enjoyed getting to know Delta flight attendants through my work on the Delta AFA-CWA Get Out The Vote campaign. I am one of the Northwest flight attendants they may have seen at JFK. I worked side by side, shoulder to shoulder with Delta activists and shook hands with a lot more Delta flight attendants. Everyone was very welcoming, even those who had a different point of view regarding AFA-CWA. I found them to be honest, hard working, intelligent, committed and above all courageous. It's my hope that they enjoyed getting to know us as well. But, in all honesty, I know there were a few who were not too happy to see us because the primary reason we were there in the first place was to talk with them about AFA-CWA—and some of them didn't want to have that conversation.

I tried putting myself in their shoes. I'm not so sure I'd be too glad to see someone whose sole purpose is to sell me on an idea that is completely foreign to me. At Northwest, we are in the process of transitioning into a new bidding system, PBS. For many years we have had SLIC. I can't stand the fact that we have to use this new bidding system! I get so worked up I actually find myself screaming at the computer, "Why do we have to learn PBS? What is wrong with the way we currently bid? Why do we have to change?"

It must be really difficult to consider the possibility of changing *an entire way of life* that has always existed in your work environment, not just one small part of your job like bidding. Delta flight attendants have *never* had a union. In a sense this trepidation about change is the same for us at Northwest—except we have *always* had a union to lead us. Personally, I cannot imagine life *without* union representation, just as many at Delta cannot imagine life *with* union representation. When someone suggests to me that we could end up without our union, I get very defensive; it worries me, and in fact, it makes me angry. I'm only human, and most of us are very resistant to change. So, even though I have different feelings and experiences within a union I can, as a fellow human being, understand how the very idea of such a big change could provoke strong feelings either way.

Still, a large percentage of the Delta group expressed a desire to change! Over 5,200 Delta flight attendants voted for AFA-CWA. These people recognize that if the merger is approved we will be the largest airline in the world with over 20,000 flight attendants. They also realize that even though the new airline will be called "Delta," it will most likely be a different Delta than they have ever known.

Delta Air Lines is not buying Northwest Airlines. The two companies are merging operations: routes, assets, employees and management. In the event of a successful merger there will be many changes, with or without a flight attendant union the property. We could see new managers, new corporate philosophies, new services, new bases. Some bases may close and there may even be new ones that open. It will be interesting to discover just how different the two management styles may be. The main goal, of course, will be for the new company to be profitable and successful.

In my experiences with Delta employees, one point was raised over and over again—seniority. Many flight attendants are under the impression that arbitration is best when it comes to merging two seniority lists. They somehow believe that because the merged airline will be *called* Delta, this guarantees an arbitrator will give the "original" Delta flight attendants a better result in terms of seniority. When dealing with an outside arbitrator, however, there is no guarantee.

In airline mergers, "fair and equitable" seniority integration is now required by law, but the interpretation of "fair and equitable" is entirely up to the arbitrator. What is not open to interpretation is the "full current bidding seniority" method of combining the lists, as is required by the AFA-CWA Constitution and Bylaws. That guarantees a fair and equitable solution and would give more protection than the new law, because our integration method recognizes length of service for each individual at each airline and slots them in accordingly.

During a few of my conversations, some Delta flight attendants conveyed a message to me that really surprised me: many expressed fear. I was astonished! They were actually *afraid* of talking with me; afraid to vote for a union because they thought there could be some type of retaliation from the company—that they could even be fired for associating with us. I found that hard to believe, especially here in the United States of America in 2008! Why would management retaliate against *any* of its employees for simply learning the facts and talking with future co-workers about their legal right to have union representation? Why would management harass, threaten, intimidate or cause fear in *any* employee who was acting completely within the laws of this land? Why would these flight attendants be *afraid* when, in fact, both Delta CEO Richard Anderson and President Ed Bastian have repeatedly stated in public that they respect an employee's right of self-determination with regard to union representation?

Surely, Delta is open to the idea of unions. After all, the Delta pilots and dispatchers have a union. I decided to talk to some pilots. The Delta pilots I spoke with were just as friendly as everyone else I met at Delta. They weren't afraid to talk to me and most of them were very proud to be part of ALPA. They seemed to believe it is possible to be a proud employee at Delta *and* be a proud member of a union, without hurting anyone and without anything to fear. I agree because I'm proud to be a 24-year flight attendant at Northwest *and* a very proud member of AFA-CWA. I am *not* afraid to stand up for what I believe in at work, at my union, or in any other situation. And I am certainly not afraid to exercise my rights as an American citizen, including the right to free speech and the right to organize at the workplace.

Change *is* coming! And while we may all have different opinions about that change, I believe there are a few things we all have in common at Delta and Northwest:

- We want our company to be successful—and we want to be part of that success!
- We want job security, fair pay and benefits.
- We want a safe place to work where *fear* of any kind is not part of the equation.
- We want a voice in our future and a seat at the table during merger discussions and beyond.
- We want full seniority integration protection.
- We want our loyal commitment and length of service to our company to be honored and secured in retirement.
- We want our jobs to be performed by flight attendants on *our* seniority list, not outsourced to exploited workers.

How do Northwest flight attendants best achieve these goals? Do we just sit back and hope it all works out in our favor, relying on management to do the right thing? Or do we take an active role, stand together in unity and use our collective voice to speak out for what we all desire and deserve?

In the coming weeks and months, we will be answering these questions individually and as a group. This will be the biggest decision of our working lives: whether or not we **make the choice to have a voice** at work.

I have decided to keep talking about union representation with Delta flight attendants. I'm committed to protecting *our* future during these times of change. I am not afraid to speak out about flight attendant solidarity.

My only fear is that if you don't join me in this commitment to our careers and to our future, we will be forever silenced—and will have no one to blame but ourselves.