

AFA-CWA Puts Flight Attendants First

By Mollie Reiley, pre-merger Northwest/Delta Air Lines Flight Attendant



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Mollie Reiley tells of her experience and why Frontier flight attendants' true home is with AFA-CWA.

I Am a Flight Attendant First

In my 35 years of flying, my flight attendant responsibilities have always come first. As a new hire training for our Teamsters Local 2000 Grievance Committee; as two-term Secretary-Treasurer and Trustee of Teamsters Local 2000; as a PFAA member and activist, I was a flight attendant first. Now, as a pre-merger Northwest/Delta flight attendant and purser, AFA liaison in the Delta representation campaign, and AFA member, I am proud to say that I finally belong to a powerful union that puts flight attendants first. AFA is a union of, by and for flight attendants and it is our home, as flight attendants.

AFA Offers Focus, Strength, Resources

When Northwest Airlines flight attendants joined AFA-CWA in 2006, we were in a very precarious situation. Our airline was in bankruptcy and we were represented by the independent Professional Flight Attendant Association (PFAA). Several very costly strategic errors had already been made and we were rapidly losing everything we had gained over 50-plus years of collective bargaining. It was clear that we needed new representation and AFA-CWA could provide us with the expertise and resources we needed. With more flight attendant members than any other flight attendant union in the world, AFA had already dealt with bankruptcies at several of their represented carriers. In AFA, we would have the strength and the direct resources of the 700,000-member CWA as well as the support of the 11.5 million-member AFL-CIO.

On July 6, 2006, the ballots were counted at Northwest and we had won AFA representation. We were under time restrictions by the bankruptcy judge and had exactly 14 days to come up with a new tentative agreement. Interim leaders were appointed who selected a negotiating committee consisting of seasoned, professional AFA staff negotiators and legal representatives. We left the next day for Minneapolis to begin negotiations with Northwest management.

The information and ideas the AFA staff brought to the table from their experience working with the numerous airlines in AFA was extraordinary. Our team had industry-wide knowledge and offered creative ways to solve deadlock issues. We had the airline industry expert and long-time AFA consultant Dan Akin in our caucus room. I kept waiting for the AFA staff to tell us what to do but it never happened: They left it to us to make the decisions with all of their support and guidance behind us. I cannot describe how well supported we were and will never forget what happened next. Management had never before dealt with such savvy, professional union negotiators and it left them at a distinct disadvantage. It was truly the first time in my many years of dealing with Northwest management that they were visibly uncomfortable. When we left the room, it brought me to tears.

We were in bankruptcy negotiations and that meant sacrifice. There would be grave disappointment among the members but we proceeded with what can only be described as damage control, preserving enough of a foundation to rebuild upon later. Without AFA, the damage would have been far greater.

A Home for Flight Attendants

In the past, I was skeptical about a single craft union—a union just for flight attendants. I believed that we needed a large union behind us. When AFA merged with CWA with an agreement to maintain their autonomy within CWA, there was suddenly a union that had it all. AFA-CWA has the focus of a single craft union on our profession with the backing of a much larger union with extensive resources available to support our efforts. AFA offers member training in EAP, air safety, health and security, government affairs, grievance handling, and negotiations, with opportunities to put those skills to practical use on active, directed AFA committees. At Northwest, I have seen so many flight attendants get bitten by the activist bug, getting involved in the AFA structure. As AFA members, we are poised to take an active role in advancing our profession at the negotiating table, on Capitol Hill and in the agencies that regulate our profession. The support we receive from AFA just cannot be matched by any other union that represents flight attendants.

In addition, the highly democratic AFA structure mirrors our profession with officers elected at each base from amongst our peers who form the Local Executive Councils (LECs). In turn, the LECs elect Master Executive Councils for each airline. With AFA, you will only be represented by flight attendants from your own airline who work in conjunction with the AFA international staff.

AFA's focused attention on flight attendants has helped us make so many positive changes in so many different areas, from contractual changes to legislative changes that directly impact our members lives. We have found our flight attendant home with AFA-CWA and encourage you to do the same!