

DELTA NEEDS, WANTS AND USES UNIONS

June 5, 1979, aboard Delta Air Lines, en route NYC to Nassau, Bahamas. Traveling as a NRSA, in Pan Am jargon, "SUBLO", I am looking forward to the week ahead, attending a course in marine biology. This escape is a welcome respite from a busy schedule of flying to Europe every Friday afternoon- Sunday afternoon and attending classes Monday-Friday morning, working towards a second Bachelor's degree, this one in Nursing.

The 2 1/2 hour flight is smooth and not busy. Being active in health and safety issues at our Pan Am flight attendant union, I saunter to the back galley and chat with the two Delta flight attendants. During our conversation I ask how come Delta flight attendants are not unionized. After all, Delta is one of the top 10 US carriers. They laugh and blithely respond that they don't have to unionize.

These two career women, about the same age as I, explain that what Delta flight attendants do is look at what the flight attendants at all other major carriers have negotiated in their contracts, then bring that information to Delta management and say, "Give us just a little more than what they've got, or we'll unionize." They continue, "As long as we keep threatening them, we get what we want. We don't have to unionize".

What a stunning revelation, one that, obviously, left a lasting impression.

Fast forward to January 1991. Pan American World Airways, arguably America's flag carrier to the world, had suffered hijackings, terrorist attacks and, finally, was blown out of the sky over Scotland. Worse, management made poor decisions. Pan Am staggered under the weight of financial losses. Appeals to the US Congress for financial aid fell on deaf ears. In January 1991 Pan American World Airways declared bankruptcy. Part of its reorganization plan was to sell its North Atlantic routes.

Keenly aware of the need to save jobs, the 5 unions on the Pan Am property, including the Independent Union of Flight Attendants, formed a coalition. Other US carriers were interested in buying the routes, but not taking the Pan Am people. The Union coalition determined not to allow the sale of the routes to any carrier that did not also take the Pan Am people. The Union coalition put together a "road show", presenting to other carriers the incredible wealth of world-wide experience and expertise residing in Pan Am personnel: pilots, flight attendants, customer service agents, reservations agents, mechanics, under-wing ground personnel, etc..

Delta, at that time, was primarily a domestic US carrier with a few international flights out of Atlanta. The Pan Am Union coalition approached Delta and presented the "road show" explaining how beneficial it would be for Delta to take, not only the Pan Am North Atlantic routes, but the personnel already experienced in operating those routes. Delta would have the incredible opportunity to suddenly catapult to the top tier of US international carriers in terms of cities served. Delta agreed.

November 1, 1991, Delta began flying, non-stop, from JFK to 27 cities in Europe, serving more European cities, nonstop, than any other US carrier. Delta had taken thousands of Pan Am employees, including 1,802 flight attendants. The coalition of Pan Am Unions had saved thousands of jobs. If it were not for the 5 Unions on the Pan Am property, Delta would not be where it is today. All of us at Delta have the Pan Am Unions to thank for growing Delta and saving jobs. Yes, Virginia, unions CAN save jobs.

Fast forward to September 17, 2010. A very large piece of mail arrived from Delta Main Office. It lists some items of what the flight attendants of 4 other carriers have negotiated for in their union contracts. It shows Delta with a higher pay scale. Shades of June 5, 1979!

Delta is still doing what those 2 flight attendants described to me 31 years ago, scouring through the hard work of other flight attendant negotiations and using other flight attendants' labor to form the basis upon which Delta's decisions will be made.

Isn't it time for us, with the incredible wealth of knowledge and experience within our own group, to step forward and negotiate for ourselves?

Isn't it time for Delta flight attendants to have our own voice, speak out for ourselves and no longer depend upon plagiarizing off other flight attendants' hard negotiating work? Isn't it time for us to have our own legally binding contract?

Leslie Hogan, NYC/JFK
Delta flight attendant