

Delta / Northwest Merger

Real Seniority or Delta Seniority?

Of all the deceptions, threats and false promises that are part of corporate efforts to suppress voter turnout in union elections, few sink to the level of Delta's current campaign to distort the benefits of seniority in a union contract.

Delta is trying to convince employees that there is little difference between Delta's idea of seniority, and seniority as contained in the IAM-Northwest Airlines contract.

Nothing could be further

from the truth.

The key difference is this: With a contract, the employee owns his or her seniority rights throughout their career, but without a contract, Delta owns those rights; lock, stock and barrel.

The Union Difference

Seniority is traditionally used to determine shifts, choose vacations, select days off and secure opportunities for promotion. While long-term employees may

also accrue additional pay based on the number of years worked, the opportunity to work a shift that suits their families' needs can have a far greater value.

Few benefits carry as much heft as contractually-guaranteed seniority, particularly in the turbulent airline environment, with the near-certain prospect of additional mergers, bankruptcies and layoffs.

And yet, Delta wants to misdirect attention about how work groups will be integrated once Northwest's and Delta's operations are fully merged. Legally, integration of seniority lists for each classification must be done in a "fair and equitable" manner.

This "fair and equitable" legal requirement has become the foundation of Delta's claims that there is little difference between seniority with or without a contract.

Enforceable Rules

Federal law may require seniority lists to be merged in a "fair and equitable" manner, but it is totally silent on how that seniority is to be applied once established. Lacking a legally-binding contract, with language



Transportation Vice President Robert Roach, Jr., traveled to Delta's hometown of Atlanta, GA, to address the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and urge all unions to oppose the carrier's effort to suppress workers' voting rights.

side of the union context are free to make suggestions, but the company is free to ignore those suggestions. And while arbitrators provide some degree of neutrality, operating under the “fair and equitable” standard, arbitrators have erased decades of workers’ seniority when union representation did not survive a merger.

Even after an integrated seniority list is established, nothing, in the absence of a contract, prevents a company from altering the benefits and modifying terms that are traditionally derived from seniority.

A strong, secure seniority system is a basic right of any union-represented employee. With it, every day, every year on the job is credited, respected and valued. Without it, an employee must rely on management to always act in a fair and impartial manner – a tall order indeed.



Bill Burke, Page One Photography

Guaranteed Rights

The current IAM-Northwest agreement guarantees furloughed employees a right to recall to their prior location, not at the discretion of management, not in some random order, but according to their seniority, period.

The assurances by Delta management that committees of employees and arbitrators will govern the integration process should provide little comfort for Delta and Northwest employees.

Employee committees out-

“Seniority is an important right, and it’s only truly enforceable in a union contract,” said Northwest Airlines Customer Service Representative Erin Marker of Local 1833 in Minneapolis, MN.

spelling out precisely how and when seniority is to be applied, a worker’s seniority is little more than a number on a list.

For years prior to last year’s merger announcement with Northwest Airlines, Delta employed a seniority system that provided telling examples of how a company-owned seniority system would operate.

In the event of a layoff, a Delta employee had no option to exercise his or her seniority beyond the borders of the station where he or she was employed. By contrast, the seniority language in the IAM-Northwest contract guaranteed the right of employees to exercise their seniority across the entire system, rather than a single location.

This single difference between Delta seniority and IAM seniority could mean the difference between a paycheck and an unemployment check.

The guaranteed right of recall

after a layoff is also absent from Delta’s idea of a seniority system. Without a contract, a Delta employee must rely solely on management’s discretion for any recall to work following a layoff.

The Machinists union is fighting to protect seniority rights for Northwest and Delta workers as the two carriers continue to merge.