

EDITORIAL

OUR VIEW

Editorial: Hawaiian Air jobs must stay in Hawaii

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Skilled machinists who work on Hawaiian Airlines' fleet and those working on Alaska Airlines' planes are represented by two different labor unions. Now that Alaska's acquisition of Hawaiian has made the two airlines one company — with one operating certificate, and Alaska in control — these workers must choose one union. And that choice could determine whether Hawaiian's maintenance operation and its jobs have a home-base future in Hawaii.

The union representing Hawaii's aircraft maintenance team, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), has years of representation in the islands as a plus. IAM also has a stake in defending jobs based in Hawaii because the union casts a wider net: Alongside machinists, it represents a range of aircraft maintenance workers, including line servicemen, cleaners and contract service providers. When additional employees are added to these positions, it's good for IAM — and it's also good for Hawaii's economy.

The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA), meanwhile, represents Alaska's skilled mechanics, utility workers, fuelers, planners and maintenance control staff. AMFA's pitch to Hawaiian Air mechanics includes a significant pay gap — a \$28,000 difference — between top-scale licensed technicians at Alaska and those at Hawaiian. One could argue



that boosting Hawaii mechanics' pay by that much would also be good for the economy — and that's true.

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IAM notes that it's poised to renegotiate the machinists' contract if it wins the representation vote, with a lot of room to raise top pay. And both unions pledge to aggressively defend job numbers — as does Alaska's corporate leadership. But when keeping good jobs in Hawaii is the priority, as it must be, IAM's record of nurturing and preserving a well-paid Hawaii workforce seems to offer an edge.

Keeping good jobs in Hawaii must be the goal. Hawaii is a small state, with a limited supply of highly skilled, highly paid jobs — a category the state would like to see grow rather than retract.

IAM's success in keeping good jobs in Hawaii shows it can be done. This played a part in federal approval of Alaska Air acquiring Hawaiian, which included a requirement that all union jobs be retained. Whichever union prevails in an upcoming vote, such flex will undoubtedly be required again.



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With past experience to back it up, IAM warns that an AMFA win would be a step toward Alaska's relocation of Hawaii flight mechanics. The union claims this will influence service quality by slowing down repairs for aircraft landing in Hawaii, in addition to diminishing the overall strength and diversity of the isles' labor force and economy.

IAM represents 2,550 union ground workers and mechanics at Hawaiian, and 5,103 union ground workers at Alaska. AMFA represents only mechanics at Alaska — “mechanics,” in a stricter sense, which doesn't include cleaners or support staff. Alaska's airline fleet is about three times larger than Hawaiian's, but AMFA's mechanics unit represents 1,000 members, while IAM's represents 900.

Of IAM's 900 mechanic's union members, fewer than 70 are support workers in categories AMFA excludes. But this representation is more important than numbers; it also exists as a barrier to outsourcing support work, which shrinks union membership and also typically shrinks worker pay.

The outsourcing issue matters a great deal to those doing the jobs. Last month, airline cabin cleaners picketed at San Francisco's airport, protesting an airline contractor's suspension of 15 cleaners who complained about unsanitary conditions. Airline mechanics joined the picket line, drawing attention to the fact that those jobs were outsourced, eliminating unionized airline workers with better protections.



IAM's membership may be relatively small in Hawaii, but the significance of its representation punches above weight — as will the upcoming union membership vote.

An inflection point will arrive when the current Hawaiian fleet of Boeing 717s ages out, as noted by AMFA regional director Earl Clark. "That work should remain in Hawaii as long as the fleet exists — about five years."

His words were meant to reassure, but five years? For this state and its workers, securing economic vitality and longevity with a thriving Hawaii base is key.



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