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AIRLINES

Sara Nelson is the new president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which represents 60,000 flight attendants, including 10,000 retirees, at 19 U.S. airlines. She became active in the union soon after becoming a flight attendant in 1996 at United Airlines and was its vice president from January 2011 until June 2014, when she assumed the presidency. As vice president, she led the AFA's organizing efforts after the mergers of United and Continental Airlines and regional carriers Pinnacle Airlines, Mesaba Aviation and Colgan Air— now Endeavor Air—and the “no knives on planes” campaign to overturn a Transportation Security Administration decision to allow passengers to carry pocket knives.



Sara Nelson (interviewed by Larry Swisher Dec. 2)

New Leader of Association of Flight Attendants Sees Challenges, Opportunities in Airline Mergers, Aims to Bridge Pay Gap Between Mainline, Regional Carriers

Bloomberg BNA:

To start off with, why don't you tell us a little about the workers you represent. I estimate roughly half work for network carriers like United Airlines and half at regional and smaller airlines. Is that correct?

NELSON:

Right. So we represent approximately 60,000 flight attendants at 19 different airlines. We represent flight

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attendants at United Airlines, and they are our charter carrier from 1946 when they first voted the union in. And it was the first flight attendant union. But we also represent several regional carriers, some niche carriers, such as Hawaiian Airlines and Alaska Airlines, and some charter carriers, too.

BBNA:

And what can you tell us about flight attendants these days? Are they young, old, white, black, female, male?

NELSON:

Well, that is actually a product of AFA's work throughout the years, because AFA's first objectives were to beat back the discrimination that we faced initially on the job.

This job was only provided to single women, single white women I should say, and so we fought very hard for men to have the same rights that we have as flight attendants, and we also beat back restrictions such as the ability to get married, have children, the ability to avoid stepping on the scale before you could go to work.

And we fought hard to expand the job for the opportunity for anyone with the heart of a flight attendant to apply and become one. So we have a very diverse look now about us.

And you ask, "Are they young or old?" Well, today that's more of a product of what's been happening with the industry than it is any sort of restrictions on age. So we beat back age restrictions as well, and today for the most part, we've got a mature workforce, because there hasn't been a lot of recent hiring, at least at the major airlines.

We went through the bankruptcies and the economic downturns and saw a lot of job loss, and we also saw airlines working more towards productivity changes so that flight attendants are working longer hours for less. And what that also has done is it has created a bit of seniority stagnation, so we actually have a very mature, experienced workforce for the most part across the industry—with the exception possibly of the regional airlines, where we see some more turnover.

BBNA:

What about yourself? What made you want to become a flight attendant and then later to become active in the union?

NELSON:

I went to school to become a high school English teacher, and as I was doing my student teaching and working three jobs and preparing for my life as an educator, my friend became a flight attendant and talked to me about the benefits of being a flight attendant.

I didn't understand at the time that it was because of a union, but she described all the benefits of being in a union. There was a pension, there were work rules, there was a pay scale that was actually higher than the one I was looking at as a first-year teacher. And all of those things attracted me to apply for the job in addition to the fact that I would get to travel and meet people and see the world in my early 20s.

The first time I experienced being a number was as a flight attendant at United when I didn't receive my

paycheck. So I had to try to get management to help me get my paycheck, and I didn't get a great response for two paycheck cycles.

And it was a flight attendant—a flying partner I had never met before—who came up to me in the office when I was quite upset and trying to ask someone for help and she handed me a check for \$800 and she said, “Number one, you go take care of yourself, and number two, you call your union.”

I really learned everything I needed to know about what it meant to be a member of this union. Because as flight attendants, I have found, there are very few people who are better at taking care of others, and through our union we can be organized about that and get the most out of it.

I have a strong sense of justice, and I speak out regularly. And immediately, we were in contract negotiations, and I didn't think that what we negotiated actually represented the work of these amazing people that I had met.

So I became an agitator and a dissenter, really, and just fought to be a part of my union and have a voice in my union. And I have grown to appreciate the fact that the women who formed our union held such a high regard for democracy that any individual member can stand up at any time and make a difference and make a change and run for any office in our union.

It's only a union of, by and for flight attendants, and the members really hold the power in this union. And that's what attracted me, that's what allowed me to get involved, and that's what makes me proud to lead this union today.

BBNA:

There have been a lot of changes in the industry since you started out. How has that changed the lives of flight attendants on the job?

NELSON:

The job of flight attendant has changed a lot since I started flying in 1996. We have always served as aviation's first responders. We are responsible for the safety, health and security of the passengers in our care.

But during my time, we have experienced September 11th. In fact, I was based in Boston as a United flight attendant, and it was my very good friends and the flight that I often flew, Flight 175, that ended up at the World Trade Center.

We faced unspeakable grief, and we faced an entirely new profession after that point, because not only were we aviation's first responders, now all of a sudden, we were also aviation's last line of defense. And so our responsibilities grew.

At the same time, the industry took a nosedive, and we immediately lost hundreds of thousands of workers. And then, all of the bankruptcies that restructured the airlines and—management believes—restructured our jobs and what it means to be a flight attendant or an aviation worker.

This wasn't just happening at United; it was happening across the industry. So flight attendants everywhere lost pensions, took a hit in that retirement security. We lost across the board 30 percent to 40 percent of our pay, we were working longer hours and our staffing was cut, too.

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So our airplanes are fuller than they've ever been, our work days are longer, and our workload is much greater, because we are charged with looking after and managing more passengers than ever on board our flights.

The security duties are huge. Every single day since September 11th, we go to work with an even greater sense of responsibility. There is not one day we go to work that we don't think about the potential for a repeat of September 11th, because we have promised each other, "Never forget and never again."

BBNA:

How does the union allocate its resources among its different priorities, such as being a voice for flight attendants before Congress and the regulatory agencies as opposed to more traditional union work of bargaining and organizing?

NELSON:

The majority of our resources go to supporting our locals and providing representation right where our flight attendants are. That also includes negotiating the contracts that form the rules for that work. But we also have a very robust program here in Washington, D.C., and flight attendants have demanded that we have programs where we have specialists in the area of safety, health and security.

We also have an industry-leading and sometimes very unique AFA employee assistance program (EAP). It's a peer-to-peer program that's been recognized by the president of the U.S. But it's not something that we work through the companies or the airlines where we work. It's a solely peer-based program so that we can provide help to members. It's a very, very successful program that provides help for flight attendants throughout the industry no matter which carrier they fly for.

We also have a department of government affairs because of our work on Capitol Hill, with the different agencies we work with, and members of Congress. It's very important because our jobs are highly regulated, and the laws that protect our jobs and the benefits that we have and the regulations that we have for safety and security are extremely important not only for our quality of work life but for providing for our families and being able to do our work as first responders.

BBNA:

What do you think are the greatest challenges facing flight attendants?

NELSON:

Today, one of the greatest challenges is the consolidation of the industry. That is a challenge not only domestically—because now we have three major network carriers, four, if you include Southwest Airlines—and they also contract out the regional work. So these three carriers are really controlling what the entire industry looks like in the U.S.

Beyond that, there is also the pressures of globalization. So we are actively working to keep Norwegian Air from getting approval from the Department of Transportation for a foreign air carrier permit, because Norwegian is trying to set up a scheme—a flags of convenience model—for aviation which would allow airlines to get a certificate in a country other than the one where they are flying from so they can shop for the lowest labor standards, the lowest safety standards, and that's what Norwegian has done.

So they have this scheme where they are certificating the airline in Ireland, hiring crews in Asia, and flying, not through Ireland, but from Norway to the U.S. or other points. We are fighting very hard to get the DOT to reject that application, because we know if Norwegian is able to do this, it will set up a standard for the airlines from the Persian Gulf to do the same, or airlines from Asia to do the same, and it will be a completely unfair market for U.S. airlines, and it will undercut our labor standards and not even allow us to collectively bargain.

So this is our greatest challenge today, and we're very aware of the pressures of competition from international markets.

BBNA:

What motivated you to run for president of the international and challenge a sitting incumbent?

NELSON:

I believe very strongly that we should be upholding AFA's first objective, and that is to unite all flight attendants in the industry.

Through mergers and consolidation, there have been some conflicts with union representation. In the case of Delta Air Lines, Northwest Airlines flight attendants lost representation, lost their contract after 60 years, and I don't believe that we can let that happen. I saw the devastation of the bankruptcies, and we fought so hard to keep as much in place as we could during that time, during all of those cuts.

Flight attendants have contributed immensely to the long-term success of aviation, and now today, through consolidation, airlines are making billions of dollars, and we should participate in that success. So I see these mergers as an opportunity for us to gain back what we've lost and take a step forward for the next generation of flight attendants.

I decided to run for president because I didn't see that there was the same commitment to maintaining and fighting for that first objective of uniting all flight attendants and what it means to build power for flight attendants, to be getting our piece of the success that we're helping create at our airlines.

BBNA:

How have you applied the lessons you learned in your previous leadership roles like the AFA's "Create Havoc Around Our System" (CHAOS - the union's trademarked strategy of targeted work actions using random, unannounced work stoppages) efforts at United and Alaska airlines and the merger representation elections to your presidency?

NELSON:

CHAOS is probably one of AFA's greatest successes. If you look throughout the years, we've made tremendous strides forward, but in terms of bargaining, CHAOS is the most successful strike in the last half century of labor.

Overnight, we won 60 percent wage increases at Alaska. It was about employing a creative tactic to gain leverage for flight attendants with minimum risk to our members and maximum pressure on management.

What I've learned from that is leverage for the employees at the bargaining table is not always found through traditional methods. We're going to have to be creative.

In this country, the laws have been whittled away or misinterpreted to decrease workers' rights to strike. And while I strongly believe that the strike is a critical component of true collective bargaining, if the strike is not readily available for workers to be able to get proper attention on their issues, then we have to be creative and find different methods and different tactics of getting management's attention and getting them to do what they otherwise would not want to do, which is share the profits and recognize the voices of their frontline workers, who know our passengers the best, know our business the best, and understand what's necessary to run a successful airlines on the front lines.

BBNA:

The National Mediation Board, which administers the Railway Labor Act, on its website describes its role, in part, as helping to maintain the flow of commerce in the airline and railroad industries through mediation, representation and arbitration. Do you think the RLA works effectively to balance the needs of workers and the traveling public, or should it be changed?

NELSON:

The Railway Labor Act ensures that we can negotiate national contracts and that is a key component to our work. I will tell you today though that this law has really been stretched by management to delay negotiations.

Negotiations have gone from approximately 18 months and in time, heading toward five and six years to negotiate contracts. This is a real problem for our members, who want to see results and deserve to share in the profits of the airlines.

So the [RLA] in concept supports workers' rights, but because of the changes in the industry and the board's requirement to protect interstate commerce, employees' rights are not fully utilized, because it is so rare that we are afforded the right to strike, which delays negotiations, delays improvements and really does not support workers' rights to collectively bargain.

I find it concerning in this political environment to talk about changing the RLA, because there are certain protections that we have within the RLA that we would not want to see take a step backward. But is it fully working for collective bargaining? No, and I would like to see a process not only in aviation but across industries that would reinforce workers' rights to collectively bargain.

On a different note, though, I don't believe that the issue of collective bargaining is ours alone to resolve in the airline and railroad industries. Collective bargaining is hanging from the cliff across this country. One of the reasons I wanted to run for president was to really promote the advantage of our union, where we focus solely on flight attendants. We make a real difference in people's lives both at home and on the job, and we identify directly with the people we represent.

I strongly believe that if the AFA is successful in uniting flight attendants, in helping each of our members understand the value of being a part of our union, that we can actually promote the ideals of collective bargaining and the benefits of being union members, because we fly to every corner of the earth.

Who better to spread the message of being in unions than flight attendants, who have direct access to 360 million people a year?

BBNA:

What goals have you accomplished so far and what do you hope to see happen in the next few years at AFA?

NELSON:

Negotiations have to be front and center, and they are the top priority of our union. We have to conclude negotiations at United and set an industry standard in those negotiations. We need to bridge the gap between regional airlines and mainline carriers.

Passengers go to the United Airlines website and buy a ticket, and they don't know whether they're flying on a regional airline or a mainline carrier, and it just so happens some of those flight attendants are making about half of what the others are making. That's not right. So we have to bridge that gap through negotiations and through organizing and building our power by bringing more flight attendants together.

[The priorities] are negotiations, organizing and playing both defense and offense in Washington so that we're not eroding the laws that protect the U.S. aviation industry but we're also promoting additional regulations that support our work as safety professionals [such as] rest provisions—regulations that avoid flight attendant fatigue. We continue to fight to keep knives off the plane.

In recent years, my accomplishments as vice president include bringing all flight attendants together in the United-Continental merger under the AFA banner, bringing flight attendants together in the regional industry, too, at Endeavor Air and taking the lead on keeping knives out of the cabin when the Transportation Security Administration changed the rule overnight [and] national aviation security policy suddenly stated that it was safe to have knives back in the cabin.

And we led the charge with the coalition of flight attendant unions to reverse that policy in just 90 days, and it was a tremendous undertaking, but we were successful because we built an extraordinary coalition of aviation workers, passengers, lawmakers, law enforcement officers. And we were successful because we built a strong coalition around a common-sense agenda.