Compass Airlines Flight Attendants—Ten Years of Travels, and a Look to the Future

As we look back on the ten-year history of Compass Airlines, I was recently asked to contribute an article to Integrity Quarterly on Compass Flight Attendants and our history at Compass Airlines. Questions I began to ask myself were: Do we just look back or do we look forward too? What about the AFA story? Is this to be just a written piece of warm and fuzzy nostalgia? Can I be objective? I decided that it was going to be a mix of all of this—that we can’t just look at the past without giving credit to what defines us as Flight Attendants, and union sisters and brothers, and think about what the future holds!

2006—A Beginning

Compass Airlines owes its very existence to organized labor. In March, 2006, in order to honor a “scope” clause in the pilot’s contract, Northwest Airlines and its pilots agreed to a concession on the clause which protected pilot’s jobs as Northwest desired to fly 76-seat regional aircraft on its routes. Northwest ALPA allowed a limited number of these aircraft to be flown by outsourced pilots working for a subcontractor regional airline. In exchange, the pilots of these new aircraft would eventually "flow-up" into mainline pilot jobs at Northwest Airlines, and Northwest Airlines pilots would retain the ability to "flow-down" into the newly subcontracted pilot jobs.

NWA bought the airline certificate from Independence Air and launched an entirely new airline. Our first President was John Bendoraitis.

Many employees came over from Independence to help start Compass. On May 2, 2007 staffed with one flight attendant on a leased CRJ200, Compass Airlines took wing and flew roundtrips between Minneapolis and Washington Dulles airports.

Five individuals—Flight Attendants Scottie Peters, Susan McGarvey, John Schoolfield, Catriona Bagley and Karen Barton, led by Inflight Manager Donna Johns, got the Inflight Department started. John and Catriona are still with us today.

2007—ERJ Launch

Compass had 36 aircraft ordered—the Embraer 175. Flight Attendants were urgently needed to help get the airline up and running, with a planned August, 2007 launch. The first “Embraer” class who would help fill this need started training in July. Yet, the class was trained on the CRJ-200—which allowed the first five flight attendants to complete Embraer crossover training while Compass continued to operate its revenue flights. This July 2007 class were reserves for several weeks, temporarily based in Dulles, and completed Embraer training thereafter. The entire group was flown to Montreal on the new aircraft to use the door trainer and pass the FAA requirements on evacuations. Route proving with the FAA on the new aircraft followed.

It was at this time that the seeds of union representation were planted among the first two flight attendant classes. You are probably asking yourself why? This was a brand new company with a lot of promise! But Independence Air Flight Attendants had previously had a contract, as well as several of those in the July class who had worked for other airlines. With $15 per block hour wages, $1.35 per diem, a five-year pay scale, no contractual guarantee of work rules, working conditions or benefits, and no
protection in disciplinary action, we recognized we needed a union.

We approached the Association of Flight Attendants—CWA, organized quickly by collecting signed representation cards, and AFA supported the effort locally while Legal took it from there to the federal agency that governs airline elections, the National Mediation Board (NMB). A request for representation by AFA was submitted to the NMB in September.

Compass successfully launched Embraer service on August 21, 2007, with trips built around BNA and YVR. The mainstay equipment of Compass service had begun! Northwest passengers loved the brand-spanking new aircraft and so did we!

November 2007

A legal motion was filed by Compass Airlines management to void the request for representation, arguing that a “majority of the complement of flight attendants” planned for hire would not have the opportunity to vote. The NMB ultimately ruled in the Flight Attendants’ favor but agreed to include the flight attendants hired between the request for representation and those hired in the two months following, and set the election for November. Management quickly moved in to convince Compass Flight Attendants, many without airline experience, that they didn’t need their own union, and utilized union-busting techniques from Ford and Harrison of Atlanta. But Compass AFA Flight Attendants fought back. A website was launched. Several Compass AFA Flight Attendants campaigned very hard—others held back for fear of getting fired. Unfortunately, the election came up short by less than ten votes.

2007 – 2009

During this time, we had a change in leadership at Compass to President Tim Campbell. The company was flourishing and providing NWA with a reliable operation and commendable service by the Flight Attendants. Nicole Clevenger served as Inflight Manager, with Karen Barton as supervisor. New hiring and bases were expanded to DTW and MEM. But pay and working conditions were not improved, as the President had promised. A paltry $0.35 per hour wage increase occurred in 2008. Discontent and bad morale was apparent with Flight Attendants struggling to make ends meet. Disciplinary action was subjective. It was time for a change.

Northwest Airlines and Delta Airlines merged and we became Flight Attendants of a totally new company. Six Embraer 170s were added. A whole new set of expectations about Delta service and meeting performance standards was required of Flight Attendants.
After waiting the required length of time stipulated by the NMB, a new AFA campaign took off in the spring of 2009, with a committee formed out of the Detroit base that had a great deal of energy and zeal around organizing. Cards were collected and submitted to AFA, and then onto NMB from all three Compass bases. AFA Compass supporters conversed with one another, supported each other, and explained the need for representation. Materials were handed out. AFA pins started to show up on uniforms. The campaign was back in full swing!

VICTORY!

After a sustained and hard-fought campaign, which included informational picketing, news coverage, and information given to the public, Compass Flight Attendants successfully voted in the Association of Flight Attendants by a two-to-one margin on November 19, 2009. The votes were counted at the National Mediation Board in Washington, D.C. A NMB “Section 6” notice was submitted to management to commence negotiations immediately.

2010

Eva Durham, formerly of Atlantic Southeast Airlines, was hired at Compass as Director of Inflight. A MEM base closure had already been announced by Compass. Management’s approach to the affected Flight Attendants stated that they would provide a “letter for Flight Attendants to submit to their landlords to get out of leases.” Wholly inadequate, the negotiations team of AFA-CWA Bargaining Representative Joe Burns Catriona Bagley, Tanya Ehret and Jay Krohn quickly set meetings with management to hammer out a Letter of Agreement covering moving expenses associated with the base transfer, including reimbursement for utilities, security deposits, packing and shipping expenses, days off to complete the move and mileage. It formed the basis of the moving expenses section that we have today in our CBA.

Meanwhile, the officers took a survey of the membership to set priorities for the very first contract and negotiations sessions were set monthly.

2010 to 2012

July 2010 was a bit of a shock as we discovered our airline had been sold by Delta Airlines to Trans States Holdings of St. Louis, which operated two other regional airlines. It was during this period that President Campbell was replaced by Drew Bedson, who was then replaced by Brian Randow. Management’s treatment of Flight Attendants took a totally different tack.
Flight Attendants were being terminated in great numbers without just cause, with no union contract to represent them.

While negotiations were scheduled monthly, they dragged on for a year and a half; a formal request was made to NMB to intervene and get the negotiations rolling. A strike vote in the spring of 2011 was taken of Compass Flight Attendants and announced publicly by AFA’s Communications Department. Tanya Ehret was replaced by Cordie Cronen on the negotiations team in the fall of 2011. Catriona Bagley continued to lead as union president and Mike Nelson was appointed as secretary-treasurer that year.

The first tentative agreement was reached in November, 2011. However, this proposal was soundly rejected by Compass Flight Attendants. Negotiations were put on hold by the NMB until the fall of 2012, when contractual sections were reopened.

2013 -- Our First CBA !

AFA-CWA Negotiator Suzanne Balzer joined the negotiations team. Sam Ward replaced Cordie Cronen, and Mike Nelson replaced Jay Krohn. After much leverage placed on Compass by the NMB, in tandem with a reenergized negotiations team, a tentative agreement was reached with the company, to be voted on by the membership.

On May 1, 2013, Compass Flight Attendants joined their flying partners at the 21 other AFA-represented airlines with their very first Collective Bargaining Agreement, covering wages, work rules, working conditions and benefits. Committees were set up and AFA International sponsored trainings began. A real union was underway!

2013 to 2017, and Beyond !

Expansion, expansion, expansion. We opened a LAX base and implemented another set of airline standards in procedure and service in 2014 with the advent of American Airlines flying. DTW closed, SEA opened. Hiring went out of sight. Eva Durham left, was replaced by Kim Fredette. Compass brought on a new Director of Inflight, Peggy Groebe, who brought on a team of Inflight Department experts from various airlines with her. Jake Rosholt replaced Brian Randow, who then was replaced by Bob Gleason.

Operations continue under the ownership of Trans States Holdings. AFA Compass MEC Officers Mike Nelson, Heather Harris Wiseman, Terry Kiernan and LEC Council Officers Jana Carstedt, Mary Nadeau, Brandon Stone and Troy Adams represent us and direct the union. Committees flourish with an exceptional group of trained volunteers. Everyone flies the line and divides their time with their primary role as Compass Flight Attendants. We are quickly moving west and the MSP crew base, where it all started for Compass, is closing.

As I look back and to the future, I often stand in awe of the strength of Compass Flight Attendants to have navigated all this “stuff” these ten years, experienced the journey together and continue to do so. With all the responsibilities of their chosen career, Compass Flight Attendants have done it with unbelievable grace and dignity. They serve as first responders—experiencing red and yellow
emergencies, giving medical attention and coordinating response, training annually for the unexpected and dealing with the traveling public, often with zero recognition from those whom they serve.

They have given excellent service to Northwest, Delta and American Airlines passengers—all the while traveling the country and the world either in the job or for fun, bonding with their crews, sharing jumpseat stories, lifting each other up through thick and through thin, and making cherished memories whether they stay or move on.

It has been an exhilarating, exhausting, rewarding and jubilant ten years. As we look ahead to our next contract, AFA-CWA will see us through again and 50,000 of our union sisters and brothers will be right by our side.

Regards always---

Jay Krohn, Co-Chair—MEC Safety Committee, AFA Compass Organizer, former Secretary-Treasurer, former Negotiations Committee member