

Wearing the ALPA Pin Speaks Volumes

By F/O Jeff Mitchell (United)

Every ALPA pilot benefits from the long-standing gains fought hard for and won by fellow pilots and ALPA staff. Right now, there are countless ranks of pilot volunteers and ALPA staff diligently working to improve the safety, security, compensation, and quality of life for our profession. The easiest way to demonstrate the unity that is required to make substantial gains for our profession is by wearing your ALPA pin.

The pin is an important symbol of this union. As a United Airlines pilot since 2008, it is abundantly clear to me how important wearing the pin on one's uniform is to a group of individual pilots. Although the pin has been a part of the uniform since the United pilots joined ALPA, it assumed a special significance with the 1985 United pilots' strike, an event that forged a fierce camaraderie and a new identity for these members.

When I arrived at United, I was pleasantly surprised by the grassroots-level unity among the pilots: the ALPA flag (the IAM and AFA flags, too) in the Denver pilot training center, the ALPA Code of Ethics in the former Flight Operations Manual, and an adamant resolve among members to wear the ALPA pin on their uniform tie.

Not wearing the pin communicates the attitude of an independent contractor—think mercenary—a pilot who can be manipulated for individual gain (and collective loss). This behavior is ultimately detrimental because it highlights points of weakness in an otherwise strong pilot group.

Many forces are in play right now that would like nothing more than to coerce us into negotiating for our jobs as individuals. How do you think our profession would fare in that environment?

The ongoing challenges of negotiating a new contract and defending the current one are part of the landscape for any organized pilot group. Both demand constant attention and effort, and all of us must be vigilant to honor the terms of

the collective bargaining agreement despite management pressure or personal convenience. The reason is obvious: establishing a pattern of bending these rules can later prove detrimental at the negotiating table.

But with professionalism and an issue-oriented approach, we can use the mechanisms within the union to address any concerns that we might have. The same is not necessarily true with our airlines, and the expectation that it should be is not realistic. Keep in mind that airlines compete with

others to offer the best service at the lowest cost. Many of these costs are fixed, leading carriers to turn to labor for concessions in an attempt to erode standards we've fought hard to achieve—standards that make the airline piloting profession a desirable job and career, standards that we can only maintain if we work together.

At the same time, we must manage our individual expectations and determine the direction each of us must take as a member of the larger group. This connection, this relationship, symbolically begins with the choice of whether to wear the ALPA pin and the message that gesture sends to the larger community.

Whether you have had problems with your union—and most likely we all have, and occasionally considered “checking out” from the group—we collectively represent our own interests and must continue to do so if we are to have a say in our profession.

I'll be the first to admit that our chosen industry is frustrating. I'm at my fifth airline and, looking back, this experience has made me realize that I am an ALPA pilot who happens to work at United. Changing carriers can be an ordeal: back to the bottom of the seniority list, sitting reserve, and first-year pay—I've been there. But all the while, I realized that ALPA has been the constant, giving me the ability to engage in and defend my profession.

It takes the right attitude to wear the pin, to make building unity one's own standard operating procedure. But ultimately, the choice is yours. 🌐



“It takes the right attitude to wear the pin, to make building unity one's own standard operating procedure.”