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October 2007 MEC Meetings Part 4, The Political Divide Explained

In Part 1 and 2 of this series I (Kevin Jones DTW320FO) wrote about the MEC meetings, in general, and my speech to the MEC on Day 2. In Part 3 of this series, I related to you how the MEC Officers elections turned out and how that outcome exemplifies the divide in the MEC. In this Newsletter, I will give you some real examples of that divide at work and give you what I observed as the underlying justification for the position of both sides.

First, I think it is fair to say that some political divide in the MEC is not unusual or unhealthy. I think the reason this divide is as wide as many MEC members can remember, is because of two reasons. First, the stakes are high, meaning we lost a tremendous amount and are now suffering everyday. The pressure to do something is on. Second, mistrust and fear. Both political sides mistrust and fear the other. This goes back to the risk/reward model. Although risk/reward is always a matter of degree, this group is polarized.

From all I heard and saw, I think I can give you an idea of what one side thinks of the other. No one said these words out right, but I think it makes the point.

Side One describing Side Two -- Business as usual is not going to get it. You are being too soft with the company. You are ignoring what the majority of the pilots want.

Side Two describing Side One --You just want to be tough for the sake of being tough. Always being hardnosed will not get us the results you seek. In the real world you must negotiate. You want to kick the door down to get what, but that does not work. You have no regard for the financial health of the company.

To make a point, both of these examples are exaggerated. However, I do believe that in the minds of these people, they both think that they are correct and they both think the other side is wrong.

Now here is a real world example of what I'm trying to explain.

One of the issues being reported to the MEC concerned a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the company and the union. The framework of this MOU was laid out at MEC Meetings earlier this year. At this meeting, fireworks erupted over this MOU.

The details of the MOU are not the important point, the politics are. But just for your understanding the subject involved the company wanting to bring back some former ATI's, hire them as line pilots (normal hiring, end of list and so forth), but before being released to the line they would train their replacements. Since this might entail some changes to the contract (read--helping the company), the MEC directed the negotiators to tie this issue to something we wanted from the company. The current strategy of you want something, we get something. In this case what we wanted from the deal was to give preferential interviews to the Champion pilots being displaced at DTW. Champion was/is cutting its DTW pilot base. Some of their flying would be coming back to NWA. That flying represented about 23 pilots, so that was the number the MEC had in mind for interviews. In the past, NWA has played Champion against us. Taking their pilots (and possibly vice versa someday) would help to stop that whipsawing.

So the MEC told the negotiators to work out the ATI deal but tie it to a Champion deal. When the MOU came out it OK'ed the ATI deal but did not get the Champion deal. One political group, in this case lead by Tom Tucker (DTW Sec/Tres), decided to get to the bottom of this and find out why the MEC's directions were not followed and who was responsible. Tom began an intense line of questioning about why we agreed to the companies request but got nothing in return. He conducted this inquiry as though it were a court of law and he was the prosecutor. He asked who knew

what and when? Who agreed to what and when? Who authorized this and that? Who signed it? Were they authorized to sign it? The questions went around the room and were directed at the MEC Chairman & Vice Chairman, the Negotiating Committee Chairman, Jon Haase and all its members, and Contract Admin Chairman, Ken Watts.

I could tell that this kind of confrontation was unusual, even for an MEC meeting. The gloves were off. The tension in the air was obvious. People were feeling uncomfortable. I'm sure some saw it as a witch hunt, and others saw it as an attempt to find the smoking gun.

In the end, both sides came out a little bloody and both made their point. It turns out that the deal the company wanted with the ATI's was already within the boundaries of the contract, so the negotiators had nothing to bargain with, thus no Champion agreement. The MOU simply clarified the understanding of the existing contract language, a common practice according to Ken Watts. Without a smoking gun, it ended in a draw. One side explained they did nothing wrong, the other making the point loud and clear, follow the directions of the MEC and you are not to do the company any favors, not even slight ones!

This example has three layers. On the surface, it was about an MOU. One layer down, it was about making certain the will of the MEC is followed. On the deepest layer it was about the elections and who would be the next MEC Chairman. Would this union continue under the guidance and leadership of Dave Stevens or change course in favor of Ray Miller.

Earlier in the proceedings, an attempt had been made by Tom to show that the MEC Chairman was not following the direction of the MEC. This involved a message to Roy Bostock, NWA Chairman of the Board. The MEC, (also at a meeting earlier this year) directed the MEC Chairman to deliver a "Lack of Confidence" (in the NWA Executive Management Team) message to Bostock. Failing to specify whether this message had to be in writing or in person and the exact timing for delivering the message, Dave Stevens elected to do it in person rather than a letter. Tom was also questioning the timing of the message as well, implying that it came too late. It should have been delivered during the middle of the "summer meltdown."

Again, on the surface, these subjects seem simple. But examining them through the distrust and suspicion that both sides have for each other and you get something else. Not speaking for either group or its individuals, here is my impression of what each side thinks about the other. The 4 that voted against Dave Stevens are thinking the Chairman is too soft on the company. The Chairman and his supporters are thinking that the 4 that voted against him are paranoid, just want to be obstinate, and represent a large number of pilots that don't necessarily share their ideas.

So, how would each group describe themselves? The 3 SEA reps described Dave Stevens this way ([Council 54 Updates, Oct. 24, 2007](#)) ...

'Dave has conducted himself in a calm, professional, and effective manner in a very contentious and difficult environment. He played a leadership role in the following major areas:

- 1) 2006 Pension Reform Legislation
- 2) Successful "ALPA Claim Sale"
- 3) Exit from C-11
- 4) Two major letters of agreement restoring important work-rules (e.g., deadhead pay, schedule vs. actual, elimination of "zero open time", premium pay over 80 hours, instructor pilot incentive pay, etc.)'

The 4 that voted against Dave have expressed these concerns.

The pilots have a very strong desire to get tough with the company. They think Dave has not been tough enough.

The organizational structure of NWA ALPA requires the MEC to set the policy and direction for the MEC Officers and Committees to carry it out. They believe that, at times, those persons and groups are not following the MEC's directions.

So where does all this leave us? If you think a calm, methodical approach to contract repair is the best approach, you are well represented. If you think a more aggressive, confrontational approach is best, you are well represented. The difference lies in whether you are represented by a majority of the MEC Senatorial votes or a minority of MEC Senatorial votes that can carry a majority in a roll call. Frustrating to both sides? Definitely. But how likely is this situation to produce the results we all seek? In my opinion, not very likely. Not so much because of the political divide within the leadership but more so because of the divide between the leadership and the membership.

If you are waiting for this leadership to save us, to charge up the hill and take it back, I think you are in for a long wait. The leadership knows the majority of the pilots are mad at them and have disconnected from the process. Our leaders are not about to charge the hill without the pilots support. So the leadership is waiting for the pilots to support them and the pilots are waiting for the leadership to do something to regain their support. Stalemate? Maybe a bit of an exaggeration but also somewhat accurate. Can it be fixed? I think so. Here is why I think that.

Both sides are on board for contract repair. Contract repair progress will bring this group back together. But, to break the stalemate, the pilots are going to have to take the lead.

The pilots are and always have been the source of strength for this union. The determination to regain our fair compensation, our quality of life, our future, and our dignity originates within the membership. The membership--the pilots—must be the ones to start the process. ALPAWatch has a plan that will allow the pilot group to take the lead, to break the stalemate. That plan is the subject of the next Newsletter, Part 5 in this series.