



# International President

Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO  
43rd Annual Board of Directors Meeting  
Las Vegas, NV  
April 28-30, 2015

**Remarks of Sara Nelson**  
**International President**  
**AFA Board of Directors Meeting**  
**April 28, 2015**  
**Las Vegas, Nevada**

Good morning AFA-CWA! I'm Sara Nelson and I am proud to be here with you, as a Flight Attendant, as an AFA member and as your International President. First, I want to applaud Debora for the all the work she does as International Vice President of our great union. And, I want to recognize Kevin, for all his support and hard work. I am honored to work with both of you to support our leaders and to stand, shoulder to shoulder, with all of you for the future of our Flight Attendant career and the members we represent.

As I look out across this room I am in awe of what I see. Flight Attendants. First responders. Activists. Leaders. And I see our relentless retirees who remind all of us that once a Flight Attendant and member of AFA, always a part of us. This year RAFA is growing in leaps and bounds as so many AFA members who have been a part of shaping who we are today have chosen to take United Airlines up on an unprecedented early out. The contributions of these AFA members and leaders are immeasurable and must be recognized. Please stand if you are a Flight Attendant who has retired in recent months or will do so in the coming year. .... You have demanded the very best for our union and your contributions are forever woven into the fabric of who we are together.

Many long-time staff are leaving their post in our union next month. We have worked alongside them, fought many battles together, shared life and many of these individuals are also dear friends. Later this afternoon we will give them proper recognition for their dedication to our union, but I think we can't thank them enough for their service so please join me in thanking them now too. And while we are at it, let's put our hands together for the AFA staff who are walking forward with us into a new chapter for our union.

AFA leads the discussion on cabin safety, health and security because AFA members and leaders have for decades demanded we put a priority on resources for this work. AFA members take part in the efforts of our union every day as they perform their work as aviation's first responders. It is an honor to work with our professionals on staff who are recognized for their passionate work for Flight Attendants and their expertise in the area of safety, health and security for cabin crew and passengers alike. This year we have taken a close look at long-time priorities and worked to set a strategic plan for each focus area, considering political climate, coalition building and real avenues for success.

This work is detailed in the written report distributed to you this morning, including a full review of our work on:

- Air quality
- Fighting Fatigue
- Addressing Aircraft Certification Standards
- Achieving Mandatory Training for both Human Trafficking Awareness and Reporting as well as Security and Self Defense Training
- Our efforts to utilize OSHA standards to push forward on common sense reform to safely address the threat of communicable disease spread through aviation
- Keeping Knives forever off our planes
- Ensuring compliance with procedures for 2 persons in the flight deck
- Addressing and mitigating the threat of connectivity through wifi or mobile broadband and keeping cell phone calls off our planes

I am not going to repeat the details of the report, but I hope you will all take the opportunity to review our work for aviation safety as well as the incredible resource we provide our members through AFA EAP, AFA Legal and extraordinary grassroots mobilization through our Government Affairs work.

You've heard me say this before, but the battles we have won through legislation, litigation and contract negotiations protect the human rights of all of our members. We won these battles in Congress, the courts and at the bargaining table – not because of the government, the law or the negotiations process, but because we built our union of flight attendants and courageously stood together in unity against injustice. During this Board meeting as we discuss the business before us let's keep front and center the reality that we have more in common than that which could ever divide us. We share a unique bond because our work is a cultural departure from almost any other job. We belong together – Stronger Together, Better Together.

It is always an honor to announce to the Board our Tentative Agreements reached and ratified over the past year. Congratulations to the Alaska MEC for extraordinary member mobilization and pushing our careers forward with a ratified agreement this year. AFA Horizon leaders are to be commended for re-ratification of contractual provisions related to FAR 117, with a 99% vote in favor it's pretty clear they've got the pulse of the membership!

And, we congratulate our lifetime AFA members from US Airways on the merged contract at American. That contract was a product of our two unions working hand-in-hand. It is an example of the extraordinary skill of AFA's Collective Bargaining Department and our insistence to put Flight Attendants and their contract first.

Management at 10 airlines face AFA Negotiating Committees currently and in the near future. With the American agreement in place the stage is set for a contract at United. It is past time for United management to get serious about an agreement if the airline is going to have a chance to compete. Now is the time to exercise the power of our unity to achieve a merged contract that represents the extraordinary Flight Attendants from pre-merger United, Continental and Continental Micronesia. Executives come and go,

but the Flight Attendants on the frontlines are the true heart of the airline. And without a doubt this is where we know we are the same. We want the best future at United Airlines together.

At Omni and Silver we are working for a first contract and the Flight Attendants who worked hard to gain representation with AFA have our full support. At Envoy we stand with our sisters and brothers against further attacks on our contracts and our careers. At Endeavor we support mid-term negotiations for improvements. At Mesa we stand with each of you to achieve real improvements from an airline that profits from your hard work. At Spirit we focus on extracting more from a management who only understands cutting back. At Frontier, Hawaiian and Miami Air we support you as you begin the education process and member mobilization to start negotiations with the full strength of an informed, engaged and mobilized group of Flight Attendants.

On March 31st we officially launched our Bridge the Gap campaign to lift standards for all Flight Attendants. Bridge the Gap is designed to keep management from pitting Flight Attendants against each other or shifting flying to cut Flight Attendant pay, benefits and work rules. Regional airlines currently perform 45% of the lift under mainline flags, yet the Flight Attendants flying for regional airlines make 45% less on average than mainline counterparts. In addition to being an issue of equality, this wage gap has the potential to drag down the entire Flight Attendant career. We're working to bridge the gap and end the wage discrimination to lift standards for our careers.

June 16th is a system-wide Day of Action for Bridge the Gap. This is a campaign for our entire union and we are working with other Flight Attendants across the industry to promote this issue. If one Flight Attendant is underpaid for our work, all Flight Attendants are in jeopardy. Talk with Guy, Deb or Toni about signing up for a Day of Action event in your location.

The Airline industry has consolidated, and management has consolidated its power. We must do the same. Flight Attendants belong together. We will build power together. If we are going to effectively fight for our fair share of the profits, we must join together in one Flight Attendant union. We have significant opportunities before us with organizing at GoJets, Skywest and in our efforts to bring Flight Attendant unions together.

Our union faces the greatest opportunity for growth, advocacy, and influence we have ever had. This opportunity must be seized but we must be patient and smart about it. I am regularly reminded in Washington by Members of Congress and their staff that the more unified an industry or organization is the more effective it will be from a public policy standpoint. Policymakers want to deal with one coalition or organization that represents an industry's interests. And, we must be prepared for likely further industry consolidation and make sure all Flight Attendants know they have a home in AFA and will not be left without a chair when the music stops. A committee formed by this Board spent a great deal of time reviewing our Merger Policy this year. I encourage this Board to take their recommendations very seriously and adopt language that will apply only for future mergers and provide the best possible guidelines for bringing Flight Attendants together in a merger – to beat back attempts to divide us and exercise our power to achieve our fair share of the profits in any merger.

AFA proposed merging unions during talks with APFA in the US Airways/American merger. It is a subject we have discussed together for nearly 30 years. APFA did not choose at that moment to harness the power that would have created for Flight Attendants. Rather than allowing management to pit us against each other and risk the contract and seniority for US Airways Flight Attendants, we made the decision to set aside the issue of representation and agree to seniority protections and a new bargaining process that included the US Airways contract. AFA promised US Airways Flight Attendants that we would continue efforts to promote a merger of unions and that is what we are doing. To date, we have worked together on contract bargaining and now it's time to move to a real discussion about how Flight Attendants build power for our future.

Last night we discussed the very serious threats to our collective bargaining rights and our jobs in U.S. aviation. Qatar and United Arab Emirates are subsidizing their airlines with over \$42 billion. This is a direct violation of Open Skies agreements they signed with the U.S. and forces the U.S. aviation industry and aviation workers to compete on a severely un-level playing field against the big three predatory gulf carriers – Qatar, Etihad, and Emirates. Every route they flood and force our airlines to cede costs 800 U.S. jobs.

That is why we are standing with other aviation unions and with U.S. airlines - Delta, United, and American – to urge the U.S. government to call Qatar and U.A.E. to the negotiating table, remove their subsidies, and reform Open Skies.

In this case, executives know it will take all of our voices - organized not just as employees of the airlines, but as respected professionals in our own right through our union - to make a difference. Even Delta management asked to work with AFA on this issue – perhaps the only admission on the part of Delta management ever that a Flight Attendant union also provides real value at our airlines. Through AFA, our voice counts as one of aviation's first responders and our advocacy is more credible to the Administration and all members of Congress. It is undeniable and should be a clear example to Delta Flight Attendants about why it is critical that they have their own voice through union representation.

Some argue that there is strength in independence. We agree that independence from management is strength. That's why we build unity among Flight Attendants to support each other and have a strong voice at each of our airlines because we are not beholden to one set of management. We are professionals in our own right, with our own voice.

We have a union focused on our concerns as Flight Attendants. AFA taps into the power of the full labor movement as an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. We amplify our voice on common issues facing American workers. And, we have the backing of millions of workers on our issues. But, with our union focused on Flight Attendants we also have experts on staff and focused priorities to achieve results that are only possible through our single class and craft union. We have a strong voice for Flight Attendants and just imagine how much stronger it could be as we bring in GoJets, Skywest, American and support our flying partners at Delta to gain representation as well. Engaged, informed and empowered Flight Attendants at airlines across the industry could indeed change

the world. We will certainly change our own experience by focusing on our common interests, defining our priorities together and using the power of all of our numbers to stand together for results.

[Set Big Goals and Strive for Unity]

Even though some people may think the current problems facing our industry and our union as insurmountable, I am convinced that they are not. I am convinced that we are approaching what may well be AFA's finest hour. We cannot be so focused on our problems that we fail to see the opportunities that lie in front of us, or what it will take to seize those opportunities. Our greatest successes – like the smoking ban, CHAOS, ending discrimination, FMLA, OSHA – started out as seemingly impossible ideas.

We did not succeed by focusing on how difficult the fight would be; we succeeded by having the audacity to take on Big Tobacco when everyone told us it was impossible. At Alaska Airlines, CHAOS™ was a huge success at the precise time the pilots determined it was impossible to successfully challenge Alaska management because of their history of union busting. Our “can do spirit” at Alaska delivered some of the biggest raises we have ever negotiated - in the same round of bargaining that saw pilots give unprecedented concessions.

In each of those battles, and in so many others, unity has been the key. We won the smoking ban because we were even more unified than the tobacco industry. At Alaska, fewer than 10 Flight Attendants dropped their union membership when management made it an open shop as part of the imposed work rules early in the strike. Why is unity so important? It is important because unity allows us to project our power in support of our issues. Let's do a little experiment to demonstrate exactly how that works:

Everybody please stand up.

Now [point to one person and call their name], I need you to start clapping your hands.

Okay, stop.

Now, all together, everyone clap your hands.

Stop. See the difference when we clap in unity?

Now [point to one person and call their name], I need you to start to stomp your foot as loudly as you can.

Okay, stop.

Now, all together, everyone please stomp your feet.

I think you get the idea. It sounds weak when just one person is doing it, but it sounds powerful when we do it in unity. That's precisely what management hears. With unity,

there is no limit on what we can accomplish together. Without it we appear weak; worse yet, we are easily ignored.

### [Iceland Women's Strike]

In 1975, the women of Iceland came together in unprecedented unity and generated so much power that they altered the course of their country's history. Tired of being marginalized, with few rights and with women's pay a mere 60% of the pay enjoyed by men, four women's organizations got together. The United Nations had declared 1975 as International Women's Year and these groups thought they needed to participate in some way.

But, at first, they could not agree on tactics. The most militant of the four groups advocated that the women should call a general strike and refuse to work for a day. The idea of a strike had appeal to all of the activists, but they worried that the word "strike" would push away more conservative and less socially active women. They wanted all women to participate, so they came up with an idea that proved to be a game changer.

Instead of a strike, they decided to advocate for women across Iceland to take a "day off" together. Women with paying jobs were not to attend work, and women who worked at home were not to do any of their usual housework or child-care. For all practical purposes, it was a strike, but softening the name opened it up to be embraced by all. Their goal was two-fold: to protest the disparity in wages between women and men, and to draw attention to unfair employment practices by demonstrating the crucial roles of women in Icelandic society.

To the shock and consternation of the men of Iceland, when October 24, 1975 rolled around, a full 90% of the women of Iceland took the day off. In a database on nonviolent action published by Swarthmore College, a description of the impact of the strike paints a vivid picture of the day's events:

"There was no telephone service. Newspapers were not printed because all the typesetters were women. Theaters shut down because actresses refused to work. Schools closed, or operated at limited capacity, because the majority of teachers were female. Airline flights were cancelled because flight attendants did not work that day. Bank executives had to work as tellers to keep the banks open because the female tellers had taken the day off. Meanwhile the men had to take their kids to work and provide them with food because daycares were closed and women would not do any of the work they normally did at home."<sup>1</sup>

Most of these women had no experience in social justice, no experience with unions, and certainly no experience with collective action. All they had was UNITY. Over 25,000 women – more than 10% of Iceland's entire population – attended the main rally in the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from an entry titled "Icelandic women strike for economic and social equality, 1975," published online in Global Non-Violent Action Database, at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/icelandic-women-strike-economic-and-social-equality-1975>

nation's capital, Reykjavik. Thousands more took the "day off" in small towns and villages across the country.

That one event, that one amazing show of unity, changed the entire nation. Almost immediately it produced results that would have been unthinkable before the strike. Within a year, the Icelandic Parliament passed a law guaranteeing equal rights to women and men, a major political step toward equality. Then, just five years after the they took their day off, Iceland voted for the first democratically elected woman to hold the office of President. Ever since 1975, the strike is remembered every 10 years with another "day off" to remind everyone of the importance of women, and to remind the women of the importance of unity.

### Closing

Unity is not "something put upon a shelf, to be taken down on rare occasions with sugar-tongs and laid on a rose-leaf. I make strong demands on [unity], call for active witnesses to prove it, and noble sacrifices and grand achievements as its results. Unless these appear, I cast aside the word as a sham and counterfeit, having no ring of the true metal. [Unity] cannot be a mere abstraction, or goodness without activity and power."

So, yes, I make strong demands on unity. Without it we risk being thought of as a sham because, you see, only with true unity can we achieve greatness as a Union. Only through unity can our collective action be powerful. It is not enough to simply be right, we must also act out of unity and through our actions generate the power needed to do justice to the representation our Flight Attendants so deeply deserve.

Thank you.