No More “Subject to Change,” We Need a Real Contract

By: Bob Cavese
American Airlines
Airport Agent, PHL

A little over two years ago, I was cut to part time during one of our Reductions-in-Force. Twice my station posted temporary upgrades to full time, once for summer traffic and then in preparation for the American Airlines–US Airways merger. As an agent with recall rights to full time, I applied for the temporary upgrade.

I was told that these agent jobs, were considered “a temporary duty,” despite being posted as temporary upgrades. Then, management said these jobs would be offered in seniority order, even to agents who were part time prior to the cuts. I couldn’t understand why the temporary upgrade to full time would not be offered first to those with recall to full time.

I had no union contract to turn to and no union steward to assist me. But I was able to grieve the company’s decision with the help of APSA/CWA.

The company responded, “We have carefully researched the policy in the past and have determined not to change this particular language for several reasons.” This non-answer strengthened my belief that more than ever we need a voice on the job to negotiate our working conditions with management.

Our policies and procedures at American are currently “subject to change” without notice. That’s because we don’t have a legally binding contract.

Through APSA/CWA, we can file grievances when we feel our “at will” procedures have been changed or interpreted differently from location to location, but it’s not the same as having a contract and work rules we negotiated. With CWA, we can hold management to their word. We can be part of the solution before we even need one: with the union, we, the agents, could negotiate fair working conditions.

Talking with US Airways employees has shown me how valuable a contract can be in protecting our jobs and our profession. Agent work that has been outsourced at American locations cannot be outsourced at US Airways because it is protected in their contract, and the US Airways agents’ work rules are negotiated and enforceable. It’s time for a voice at American that doesn’t change every time management does.

Recently, about a month after the grievance response, I was told by the manager that the two of us with recall to full time were now going to be upgraded in lieu of hiring two more part time agents. I’m convinced this would not have been the outcome without the help of APSA/CWA.

You Need to Have Someone Standing in Your Corner

By: Kathya Hidalgo
US Airways
CSA, EWR

After working at America West for six years without a contract before our merger with US Airways, I know what a difference a voice at work can make.

I believed management when they said, “stay away from the union because all they want is your dues money.” Throughout the organizing drive I avoided union activists as much as I could.

Then, I was suspended for something that was not my fault, and management wouldn’t listen to my side of the story. I had to hire a lawyer just to get my supervisor to listen to the facts. Even though the situation was eventually resolved, it cost me a lot of money and was very scary to argue my case in front of management.

Now that I’m part of a union, I know that someone’s always got my back, and I’ve got theirs. At CWA, we look out for each other.

If I have any issues at work, I know that my CWA shop steward is always there to help. And when CWA stewards talk, supervisors listen. Because our stewards don’t just know the law, they know company regulations and how to stand up against unjust decisions.

Belonging to my union and having a contract is far better, and cheaper, than hiring a lawyer. Because I’ve got the power of union solidarity behind me, management can’t just ignore my voice.

Now that the merger is moving forward, we’re going to have to vote to keep our union, and the stakes couldn’t be higher.

That’s why I’m mobilizing with my co-workers at US Airways and agents at American Airlines. We’ve got to ensure that every agent at the new American Airlines has a voice. The fact is, we’re stronger together!
Why Representation Matters in Good Times and Bad: An Interview with the Transport Workers Union

Ricardo Partida
American Airlines
Title II Facilities, DFW
TWU Local 513 Member

Q: What was your first thought when American Airlines declared bankruptcy in 2011?
A: I was glad to be a union employee. Bankruptcy laws meant the company would still have to negotiate new terms with represented employees. Tough decisions would be made, but we still had a say and a vote on any new terms. The company couldn’t just impose terms on us, unlike agents and other non-union employees.

Q: What is different for you compared to the agents during the bankruptcy process?
A: TWU immediately hired lawyers with bankruptcy to protect our interests. Management filed the terms that they wanted with the judge and we began bargaining. They court doesn’t just “rubber stamp” what the company wanted, the unions and company had to work out terms agreeable to both parties.

Q: What was the big difference with what the company originally asked for and what the union negotiated?
A: Huge! The company wanted to cut our jobs and outsource almost half of TWU represented employees, we negotiated a voluntary buy out. The company wanted to outsource all cargo work, we kept that work in all the hubs. The company wanted to outsource all facility maintenance, we kept 50% of that work, including my job. Over 3,200 jobs were saved compared to what the company asked the courts for. We even negotiated a 4.8% equity stake in the company after bankruptcy and we’re already seeing profits.

Q: Did you take hourly pay cuts?
A: No, we actually negotiated yearly structured pay raises through 2015 and an additional 4.3% pay raise. Profit sharing, which we haven’t had since 2000, will average $625 per employee at a $1 billion profit. The 4.3% increase would add about $2500 for the average TWU represented employee. Then our structured raises will be based off our new salary.

Q: What about the MOU with US Airways?
A: Our union met with US Airways management before we voted on our contract. Both parties agreed to work together on issues to speed up the process once a merger is announced. We protected what we could in case of no merger and negotiated some terms with US Airways in advance of a merger. Work at over 25 stations that were outsourced will be brought back in-house once the merger is completed. The agents, for example, have NO protections or a right to negotiate over the outsourcing imposed on them.

Q: What happens after the merger?
A: The unions have agreed to move forward as quickly as possible with single carrier integration. Once this starts, we will work with the new American and start negotiating a new single contract that covers employees at both carriers. In the meantime, we will work with the protections and contract we negotiated during bankruptcy. The new airline will have to negotiate with union represented employees and come up with a single contract before becoming fully integrated single carrier.

Q: How do you feel about being union at this point?
A: I would never give up my right to negotiate in good or bad times. If I were in the agents’ shoes now, having been a union member, I wouldn’t have to think twice about voting for representation. It was hard to watch how close the agents came to having representation before the bankruptcy concessions were done, and they still have no protection or rights to negotiate future changes. We were able to negotiate to save our members jobs.

Q: Do you have any last minute advice for the agents?
A: I sure do. It is never too late. With union representation you too will have the right to negotiate and vote on any changes in good times or bad times.

For American Airlines Home Based Representatives, getting information and getting organized with our campaign has been extra challenging. Without a central location to talk and meet, HBRs have largely organized the old fashioned way – going door-to-door to talk with coworkers in their homes and at group get-togethers like the one pictured above.

These folks are in it for the long-haul though, and have been making great progress all winter-long to reach more and more of their co-workers. HBRs are standing up and fighting back for the fair pay and equal treatment they deserve!