

The Rest of the Story about Delta Organizing

-Why the AFL-CIO Needs You-

When activists try to explain to you why you should sign a card, they will often use well scripted slogans like “we want to have the respect and dignity of a contract,” “I’m pro-Delta and pro-union,” or more recently, “pro-Delta, pro-union, and pro-USA.” Activists may also use other themes like we should distrust the outsiders who run Delta, or they may try to confuse the real issues that matter to us with topics like executive compensation. While these activists are concentrating on issues that the AFA organizing department has designed for Delta, many of them do not know the larger forces driving the organizing campaign at Delta.

This article explains why Delta is so important to the AFA, and why they have continued on a six year campaign to try to represent us. It will also give a brief background on organized labor and explain the role that it plays in the Delta organizing campaign. When your ballot finally arrives in the mail, you will have the background to decide whether you are going to support someone else’s national agenda, or continue the course and maintain our own long term success.

The Role of Big Labor

The main push to organize Delta did not begin in Atlanta or New York. It began in Washington D.C. seven years ago. In October 1995, John Sweeney was elected President of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Relations (AFL-CIO). Sweeney’s vision was to reverse the four decade long decline in the power of organized labor (Big Labor) in this country. In 1955, Big Labor represented 35 percent of the U.S. workforce. By the mid-1990’s, the ranks of organized labor had dwindled to 15 percent of the U.S. workforce. If this trend were allowed to continue, Big Labor would slowly become a curiosity only discussed in history books.

Mr. Sweeney and his leadership team created the “New Voice Campaign” to try to reverse the decline in power of Big Labor. The cornerstone of this campaign was to increase the number of union members through organizing. Mr. Sweeney pledged to devote one third of the AFL-CIO’s budget to the [AFL-CIO Organizing Institute](#) and joint organizing campaigns with the major internationals and local unions. In return, a number of the major internationals greatly increased their organizing budgets. With its war chest full, Big Labor started to look for companies to organize.

Big Labor also switched tactics. Gone were the days of waiting for “oppressed” workers come to a union and ask for help in organizing. Now, the international and local unions would go looking for workers to aid it in its quest to expand. Big Labor felt that it must organize entire industries, entire geographic regions, and entire corporations if it were to build real and lasting power. Only through industry dominance would Big Labor have the political and financial power to accomplish its agenda. Given this backdrop, it is only natural that Delta would become a target for Big Labor.

Big Labor Targets Delta

Traditionally, airlines have been one of the few private sector industries that have been receptive to unionization. If the strategy of the labor movement is to organize entire industries and companies, the largely non union Delta workforce would have to be brought under union dominance.

Enter the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA). The AFA is a member of the AFL-CIO, and the AFA has the stated goal of representing all flight attendants at all carriers. Since the AFA had been trying to organize Delta since 1996, it was natural for Big Labor to add its resources to the AFA to ensure a quick union victory. However, there was one problem.

Delta has historically provided its employees with equal or better benefits than the unionized carriers. Delta management and Delta employees have had a good relationship, working together to build a successful company in a very volatile industry. While our competitors were striking, Delta was flying full. When our competitors were leaving families stranded, Delta was ensuring that they made it home for the holidays (with the exception last Christmas when ALPA's local Delta chapter acted up.) Our hard work in partnership with management has built a company with a strong balance sheet to handle the ups and downs of this industry. It is the strength of this balance sheet that has allowed us to keep working, while others in our industry have been furloughed. [Furlough Watch](#).

Why Big Labor Must Win at Delta

But to Big Labor, a successful Delta was the non union thorn in the side of the union dominated airline industry. Big Labor needed to remove this thorn for three reasons:

First, Delta sets a bad example for unionized employees at other airlines. With Delta maintaining industry leading wages and benefits, it makes the unionized employees at other carriers wonder why they are paying dues. Also, the recent downturn in the industry showed that a legally binding contract cannot protect jobs. As union flight attendants hit the unemployment lines, Delta flight attendants are still working. If Delta were unionized, Big Labor could take credit for our working conditions instead of trying to explain to an out of work flight attendant that they are better protected than the still employed Delta flight attendant.

Secondly, Big Labor needs Delta for political reasons. Delta flight attendants would provide 20,000 votes and potential campaign contributions that Big Labor could use to influence politicians to support their legislative agenda. Big Labor can trade its financial support in elections for political support in organizing campaigns. Remember which representative provided the most congressional support for the "Appeal for Fairness?" Are you aware who provided the largest percentage of his campaign contributions? For more information, [see the AFA's wiener](#).

Finally, organizing Delta flight attendants would greatly increase the income of the AFA. According to recent LM2's, the AFA has had financial difficulties. The Delta campaign has drained it of funds that should have been used to maintain its membership. Organizing 20,000 Delta flight attendants will put an additional \$9,360,000 per year in the AFA coffers to stabilize its finances. In addition, Big Labor would get a percentage of our dues as a type of tax that it levies on local member unions.

Conclusion

Tracking the motivation of the union movement's attempt to unionize us begs the question: Are there real problems at Delta that we need a union to solve, or is the union manufacturing problems to access our pocketbooks?

We have seen that labor was in a steady decline when John Sweeney became the AFL-CIO President. Even though he has thrown millions of dollars into organizing, Big Labor's decline has continued. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, union membership decreased again last year. In 1999, 13.9 percent of all workers were union members. In 2000, the percentage of union membership slid to 13.5 percent with a slight decline in the actual number of union members. In 2000, actual union membership was down slightly from the 16.3 million members in 1999. <http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>

This steady decline in the union workforce shows that Big Labor is in trouble. Even with thirty percent of the union budget going into organizing, union membership is still declining. Unions are desperate to reverse this trend. As we all know, desperate people will take extreme measures to get what they need. Right now, the union movement needs Delta more than Delta flight attendants need a union. The AFA has the motivation and incentive to say or promise us anything in order to try to get our yes vote.

When an activist asks you to vote yes, remember that he or she may not understand the big picture. The AFA activist may honestly believe what he or she is telling you. The activist will be convincing. However, activists are trained and mentored by professional union organizers. When activists look to the organizer for support and information, the organizer knows just what to tell the activists to keep them motivated. While our activist friends might not see the big picture, these puppeteers controlling our activists know exactly the stakes of this game. Their future depends on us.

Further Reading

Print

Not Your Father's Union Movement Inside the AFL-CIO, ed. by Jo-Ann Mort, Verso, 1998.
A selection of essays on the labor movement today and John Sweeney's election.

Internet links

Bureau of Labor Statistics
AFL-CIO Organizing Institute
Open Secrets

<http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>
<http://www.aflcio.org/orginst/>
<http://www.opensecrets.org>

A DeltaFA.org Publication

www.deltafa.org

DeltaFA Talk at <http://www.deltafa.org/cgi-bin/ubb/ultimatebb.cgi>