

United Aviation Workers Land a Victory

The Power of Aviation Unions in South America: The ITF LATAM Union Network

A Case Study by Dina Feller and Teresa Conrow

One evening in late May 2014, a high level manager of South American airline LAN Peru waited until all his senior workers had left for the day before marching into the mechanics' hangar.

Armed with threats and money, he demanded the mechanics cease their public protests and work-to-rule campaign immediately, or else the Airline would take away the airplanes - and their jobs.

Any worker who abandoned the campaign would receive a sizeable cash gift on the spot.

The 220 mechanics of LAN Peru had been engaged in a five-month campaign for better pay and working conditions. The airline - a subsidiary of LATAM Airlines - was profitable. Yet the mechanics, on whom the safety of the planes depended, had not had a pay rise in ten years.

Since the start of protests, LAN Peru had adopted an extremely hostile stance towards its workers. Expect surprises, the leaders of the mechanics' union SITALANPE had warned their members. "They will try to divide and thereby weaken us."

"Planes can't fly without us"

So when the [high level manager] walked in on them, the mechanics didn't budge. Determined to win, and outraged by the threatening attitude, the men stood their ground. "Go ahead," they said. "The planes can't fly without us."

A week later, the mechanics voted unanimously to go on strike. Eventually, just hours before kick-off for the FIFA World Cup in Rio de Janeiro - an extremely busy time for all South American airlines - LAN Peru gave in.

All temporary workers were given fixed-term contracts, and any workers who had been fired would get their job back. Most of the mechanics would also receive a 50 percent salary increase, along with a bonus.

By drawing strength from unity, and pressing the company's vulnerabilities in a strategic campaign, the mechanics had prevailed.

Navigating Through Stormy Times

Another memorable victory for aviation unions in South America against LATAM airlines began with a series of seemingly innocuous social events.

Throughout 2008, cabin crew employed by LAN Argentina, a subsidiary of LATAM airlines established in 2005, began to meet regularly in social settings. They went to see football games, had coffee and mate and sometimes even hit the nightclubs of Buenos Aires.

Everyone had fun, but that was not why the group was meeting. The gatherings were carefully planned to build trust among the workers represented by Argentina's cabin crew union, the Asociación Argentina de Aeronavegantes.

As LAN Argentina expanded rapidly, it hired mostly young people with no aviation experience or experience being members of a union.

Trying to side step any dealings with Aeronavegantes, the only legal union for all cabin crew in Argentina, LAN Argentina established its own "yellow" union, ATCPEA. By firing non-conformist employees, the airline created a climate of fear.

By 2006, most LAN Argentina cabin crew were too frightened to speak to anyone from Aeronavegantes.

Aeronavegantes kept denouncing LAN in the media as part of attempts to force the airline out of the country. LAN employees felt they had no choice but to distance themselves from the union. In response to these developments, in 2007 the Aeronavegantes leaders decided on a change of course and reached out to the now 380 strong LAN cabin crew.

Aeronavegantes embarked on a step-by-step relationship building campaign focused on building trust with LAN employees. As with the Peruvian mechanics, the union could count on the full support of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and its strong network of Latin-American unions.

New Trust, Successful Battles

By September 2009, the slow approach with the LAN staffers paid off. Aeronavegantes had established a power base amongst the cabin crew.

The union felt strong enough to dare a strike of all LAN Argentina aviation unions, which would close the airport and delay flights. ITF's LATAM network supported the strike, with pilots, cabin crew, ground staff and supervisory unions demanding that LAN negotiate wage increases jointly instead of separately. LAN gave in, and its cabin crew walked away with a 21 percent wage increase.

In the years that followed, LAN kept on trying to oust Aeronavegantes. By claiming that union elections had been rigged, it tried to install its own loyalists in leadership positions. A court eventually ordered new elections, with the Aeronavegantes activists winning by a high margin.

In 2010 LAN pilots, cabin crew, supervisors, mechanics and ground staff won another wage increase of 30 percent. In 2015, LAN Argentina finally agreed to a legal collective agreement with Aeronavegantes. It was signed in January 2015 and remains in place today.

Strong Alliance against Powerful Opponent

The success of South American unions in improving wages and conditions for workers in the region's largest and, arguably, most anti-union airline provides important lessons on how to build transnational union power.

LATAM's international unions network includes pilots, cabin crew, ground staff and mechanics from 11 countries, 33 unions and six union federations, all supported by the global federation of transport unions, the ITF.

Drawing on the support and advice of such a vast network, both the Peruvian mechanics and the Argentinian cabin crew were able to increase and leverage their power. The workers were successful because they were committed to democratic union structures and developed strong relationships of trust with each other.

Through their patient, unwavering work they were able to force LATAM, the largest multinational aviation company in South America, to make seemingly impossible improvements in working conditions for thousands of aviation workers - a brilliant feat.

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