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No End in Sight for United Continental — Pilots' Union Talks

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by: Andrew Schneider

Talks between United Continental and the union representing its pilots are approaching their first anniversary, with no end in sight. The two sides remain miles apart in disputes over wage levels, work schedules and job security. From the KUHf Business Desk, Andrew Schneider reports.

If you're frustrated at how little your pay has grown since the recession, or how far it's fallen, consider the position of Captain Brian Bagenski. He's a 737 pilot, based out Continental's Houston hub at Bush Intercontinental Airport. His last raise was a 1% pay hike in October 2001. Four years later, with Continental's survival at stake, Bagenski's union agreed to a 9% pay cut as part of their contract with the airline.

"To not have a raise since my son was in diapers — he's going into seventh grade — it's no fun going home, sometimes."

Since last August, the [Air Line Pilots Association, International](#), or ALPA, has been bargaining with the merged United Continental for a joint contract covering pilots at both carriers. Captain Jay Pierce chairs the ALPA unit representing Continental pilots in the talks. Like Bagenski, he flies 737s out of Houston.

"You know our top five executives, over the last ten years, have gotten over 30% raises, and we just feel like we should enjoy in the benefits of this merger on at least some equal basis with our management group."

Pay is far from the only sticking point. The pilots' union also wants guarantees that United Continental will limit any outsourcing of flying spots to non-United or Continental pilots. Then there's the question of working conditions.

"The schedules are — I'd have to just call them brutal."

Again, Captain Bagenski.

"All of our pilots are just being scheduled literally to the maximum. I know a lot of people who have called out fatigued, just too tired to fly anymore, and that's a safety issue. That's one of our responsibilities as pilots. And I have never seen it this bad."

United representatives declined to speak on tape for this story, saying only that talks between the airline and pilots were ongoing. For some insight on United's position, I spoke with Jerry Glass, president of management consulting firm [F&H Solutions Group](#).



United Continental posted a summary of their negotiating position on a [website](#), characterizing it as “Delta + \$1” – alleging the deal was similar to the one Delta worked out with its pilots after Delta’s merger with Northwest, but with slightly higher pay. The pilots’ position is that this characterization is misleading, that in fact the proposal would involve pay cuts and worse working conditions.

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“The airline industry is very concerned about the well-being of the economy and fuel in particular and the volatility of both. So, if you’re going to enter into an agreement, and a long-term one, you want to be in a position where you don’t have to worry about going back to the employees because you couldn’t afford your contract to begin with and now have to restructure yet again.”

Until the talks with pilots are resolved, the airline won’t be able to streamline its operations by shifting planes between United and Continental’s routes. The cost savings that would bring was one of the major aims of the merger. But the pilots aren’t United’s only concern. William Swelbar is a research engineer with [MIT’s International Center for Air Transportation](#).

“They are not going to negotiate an expensive agreement with the pilots just for the sake of reaching an agreement, because they have negotiations to do with their flight attendants, with their maintenance groups, and so the pilots are really just first.”

Both management and labor are still holding out hope they’ll ultimately be able to cut a deal. But on the core issues, the two sides remain as far apart as ever.

From the KUHf Business Desk, I’m Andrew Schneider.