

# Do Buy: How to Fly Union

By Anna Del Savio—Reprinted with permission from the Northwest Labor Press

Over the past decade, America's largest airlines have become steadily more unionized. When the Labor Press started tracking airline unionization in 2012, the top airlines ranged from 70% to 85% union; today they're 80% to 87% union. Delta — the largest airline by passenger miles traveled — remains the one big exception, with just 20% of its employees represented by a union.

Today's domestic passenger airline industry is dominated by four big carriers and five small ones. The biggies are Delta, Southwest, American and United, followed by Alaska, Spirit, JetBlue, Frontier, and SkyWest.

Some of the largest airlines own smaller regional airlines that are unionized separately from the main line. Flights on those smaller airlines are typically booked through the main line, so travelers likely don't notice if the flight they booked through Delta's website was actually flown by Endeavor Air, operating as Delta Connections. In the table below, "percent unionized" refers to the primary airline and wholly-owned subsidiaries. Delta Delta is the least-unionized major airline, with just 20% of employees represented by a union. Delta ramp workers are currently campaigning to unionize with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). IAM has made at least three unsuccessful attempts to unionize ramp workers and other groups at Delta since 2010.

## SOUTHWEST

» Southwest completed a two-year process to negotiate new contracts with its 12 unions in September. The new contract for flight attendants represented by Transport Workers Union (TWU) made Southwest flight attendants the highest paid in the industry.

## AMERICAN

» American Airlines has the most union representation of all major airlines in the country. The last large union campaign came in 2014, when 9,000 passenger service agents unionized after American merged with US



Airways. In September, 132 stock clerks at PSA Airlines joined IAM.

## UNITED

» After three years of contract negotiations, flight attendants voted in August to authorize a strike, with 99.99% in support. The airline and the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) have proceeded with mediation, completing 14 sessions as of Oct. 31, while the union is preparing flight attendants to mobilize for a potential strike. A strike could only happen after consent from the National Mediation Board and a 30-day cooling off period.

## ALASKA

» Alaska Airlines is the biggest airline at the Portland and Seattle airports. Alaska's main operations are 84% union, but subsidiary Horizon Airlines is only 41% union, bringing down the overall rate. Based on passenger trips, Horizon — with flights branded as Alaska Horizon or labeled "operated by Horizon" — is among the top five airlines at the Portland, Seattle, and Boise airports. Alaska finalized its purchase of Hawaiian Airlines in September 2024. Just under 81% of Hawaiian employees are represented by unions. Alaska flight attendants rejected a proposed three-year contract agreement in August. Mediation for a new proposal is scheduled for Nov. 19 to 21. If negotiations don't wrap up soon, they could get sidelined by negotiations for joint contracts with Hawaiian Airlines workers.

## JETBLUE

» At 51%, JetBlue has the second lowest union rate of the major airlines. IAM campaigned to unionize ground

operations crew members in 2022, but the effort failed with 65% of crew members voting no. But the union is trying again. In September, IAM called on crewmembers to sign union authorization cards. JetBlue flight attendants unionized with TWU in 2018. TWU is now working to unionize 1,200 mechanics and dispatchers. In April, 160 members of Congress signed a letter calling on JetBlue to adopt a labor neutrality agreement after the airline allegedly interfered with union organizing efforts.

## SKYWEST

» SkyWest isn't a top player in national air travel, but it's one of the top three biggest airline operations at the Seattle and Boise airports. The company says 89% of its employees are represented by "in-house labor associations." But critics, including outside unions, allege the company is operating fake unions that don't offer the power or protection of a genuine labor union. In 2023, the AFA filed a lawsuit against SkyWest over violations of the federal Railway Labor Act, which governs labor relations in the airline industry. The AFA is currently campaigning to unionize SkyWest flight attendants. The Department of Labor filed a lawsuit against SkyWest in July 2024, asserting that Skywest's in-house pilot association has failed to comply with federal law concerning elections. SkyWest is a regional airline and flies for Delta, Alaska, American, and United. Flights listed for those airlines may say "operated by SkyWest."

AIRLINES	MARKET SHARE	PERCENT UNIONIZED	UNIONS
Delta	17.7%	20%	ALPA 16,960 pilots   PAFCA 490 dispatchers
Southwest	17.5%	83%	SWAPA 10,746 pilots   TWU 19,883 flight attendants, 17,892 ramp, operations, provisioning, freight agents, 496 dispatchers, 252 flight crew training instructors, 15 meteorologists   IBT 491 stock clerks; 54 flight simulator techs   IAM 8,173 customer service   AMFA 2,979 mechanics, 214 aircraft appearance techs, 52 facilities maintenance tech
American	17.4%	87%	APA 14,500 pilots   APFA 24,950 flight attendants   CWA/IBT 14,650 passenger service   TWU/IAM 12,350 mechanics, 19,100 fleet service, 2,000 stock clerks, 150 flight simulator engineers, 190 maintenance control technicians, 100 maintenance training instructors, 390 flight crew training instructors   PAFCA 570 dispatchers
United	15.9%	83%	ALPA 15,445 pilots   AFA 25,803 flight attendants   IAM 15,624 fleet service, 11,674 passenger service, 1,216 store keepers, 167 fleet tech instructors, 77 load planners, 54 Maintenance instructors, 40 security officers   IBT 9,752 technicians, 123 technical maintenance planners, 84 technical maintenance controllers   PAFCA 500 dispatchers
Alaska	6.1%	80%	ALPA 3,473 pilots   AFA 6,813 flight attendants   IAM 828 ramp service and stock clerks, 4,754 clerical, office and passenger service   AMFA 981 mechanics, inspectors and cleaners   TWU 105 dispatchers
Spirit	5.1%	85%	ALPA 3,561 pilots   AFA 6,208 flight attendants   PAFCA 100 dispatchers   IAM 366 ramp service agents   TWU 284 passenger service agents   AMFA 685 maintenance
JetBlue	4.8%	51%	ALPA 4,447 pilots   TWU 5,930 flight attendants; 35 flight instructors

Market share is from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics and is based on revenue passenger miles. Union percentage comes from the most recent 10-K reports filed by each company with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

## LEGEND-AIRLINE UNIONS

**AFA** - Association of Flight Attendants, a division of CWA

**ALPA** - Air Line Pilots Association

**AMFA** - Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (Independent union)

**APA** - Allied Pilots Association (Independent union, only at American Airlines)

**APFA** - Association of Professional Flight Attendants (Independent union, only at American Airlines)

**CWA** - Communications Workers of America

**IAM** - International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers

**IBT** - International Brotherhood of Teamsters

**PAFCA** - Professional Airline Flight Control Association (Independent union)

**TWU** - Transport Workers Union

**SWAPA** - Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (Independent union, only at Southwest Airlines)