



## Can union vote at Delta help organized labor take off?

By Kelly Yamanouchi  
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As Delta Air Lines workers prepare to vote in massive union representation elections later this year, labor leaders say wins at the company could influence organizing around the Atlanta area and the South.

"Delta is an icon in Atlanta," said Patrick Scott, who works with the AFL-CIO-organized ATL Solidarity Committee, a coalition to support union efforts. The Delta elections will "set the tone" for other unionization campaigns, he said.

But others say the elections — while significant for Delta — won't do much to change the labor equation across the region.

"I don't think that's going to affect the people that had a chance [to unionize in other industries] and decided not to before," said Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga.

Elections among flight attendants and various ground workers were set in motion when Delta merged with Northwest Airlines. Delta has historically been among the least unionized airlines, with pilots the only large group represented. Minneapolis-based Northwest was much more heavily unionized, and the elections will determine if that carries over into the merged carrier. Dates haven't been set yet.

Delta's lack of unionization has been attributed partly to its roots in the South, although a history of offering competitive wages and benefits that diluted the unions' appeal also played a role.

Georgia — where about one-third of Delta's workforce is based — has the fourth-lowest rate of union membership in the country, at 4.6 percent of workers, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures for 2009. The national average was 12.3 percent.

"The South did not have a really long history of unionization, and as the South developed economically, and jobs and people started moving here, most of these businesses started nonunion and stayed nonunion," said Barry Hirsch, a professor at the Andrew Young School of public policy at Georgia State University.

Right-to-work laws in Georgia and most Southern states, which allow workers represented by a union to choose whether to join the union and pay dues, are a manifestation of that, Hirsch said.

So union organizers see big opportunity in the outcome of elections at Delta, one of the Atlanta area's biggest private employers.

The ATL Solidarity committee, a coalition of unions, community organizations, politicians and clergy formed to campaign for the union elections at Delta and the Transportation Security Administration, met last month.

"We need to make a breakthrough and establish a beachhead of union support right here in the Deep South," state Sen. Nan Orrock, D-Atlanta, said at the event.

The Teamsters seek to organize about 340 Coca-Cola Enterprises bottling plant workers in the Atlanta area, along with mechanics at Atlanta-based Atlantic Southeast Airlines.

Teamsters airline division director David Bourne said he thinks the Delta elections could influence organizing at other airlines and at companies beyond the airline industry.

"Just the fact that (workers elsewhere) see unionization working and growing is a positive," he said.

Ben Speight, organizing director for Teamsters Local 728, which seeks to organize CCE workers, said both campaigns are pivotal.

"Delta and Coca-Cola have tremendous influences throughout our city and region," Speight said. "I think it will have a large impact."

To be sure, Atlanta is not without a union presence already. UPS, based in Sandy Springs, is a major Teamsters employer. Kroger, AT&T, Atlanta city government and Grady Hospital also have unions, according to Scott. And in the airline industry, Delta's archrival, AirTran, has unions for pilots, flight attendants and mechanics.

But Scott said Delta's marquee value is immense. Wins could lead other unions to consider how to "come down to the South and work with community allies and community organizations and organize workers," he said.

Hirsch, the Georgia State professor, thinks any spillover effects from the Delta elections will be minimal.

"You see less support and enthusiasm for unions among workers and more antagonism and resistance to unions among major employers in the South," he said.

Delta also occupies a corner of the labor market where the rules are different. Airline and railroad labor relations are governed by the Railway Labor Act and are not subject to right-to-work laws.

The unions' cause at Delta could be boosted by a historic rule change passed by the National Mediation Board in July that effectively lower the bar for organizers. Under the new rule a union need win support only from a majority of eligible workers who actually vote; in the past they have had to garner support from half of the entire worker group, regardless of how many voted.

The Air Transport Association, which represents Delta and other airlines, lost a legal challenge to the rule change and is appealing.

Serious organizing efforts at Delta date to the mid-1990s, but to little effect prior to the Northwest merger. The Transport Workers Union lost badly in an election among ramp workers in 2000, and the Association of Flight Attendants lost elections among flight attendants in both 2002 and 2008.

Some analysts at the time said the results had less to do with anti-union sentiment in the South than with organizers' inability to convince workers they would get their dues worth out of unionization.

In Georgia, as long as workers "felt they were treated right, they have not felt the need to over-organize," said Isakson.

Patrick Semmens, director of legal information at the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, said unions don't target right-to-work states "because they prefer to spend their organizing dollars on places where they can force every single worker to unionize or be fired," and that won't change after the Delta elections.

Scott said culture still plays a role in organizing, both at the company level and regionally.

"I've heard employees call Delta 'Daddy Delta'" he said.

"On the one hand there's this patriarchal figure who's going to take care of you. However, if you do things they don't like, they're going to punish you. ... There has been a culture of fear embedded here in the South when workers are organizing."

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