

# 'We Can Win Together': Delta Workers Get Boost in Big Apple



Jay Robinson still remembers the conversation that first made him understand the value of being a union member.

Now 24 years into his career as a ramp agent, Robinson often shares his story with Delta Air Lines workers across the country as they move closer to an election to join the Machinists Union. This time he speaks into a megaphone on a brisk October morning outside LaGuardia Airport, where Robinson began working for Northwest Airlines in 1994.

It was Robinson's first union job. He had an IAM contract and the security of guaranteed wage increases, health insurance, consistent work rules and more.

"I said 'That's great that the company gives us all these cool things,'" said Robinson. "My coworker told me: 'Wait a minute, the company didn't give you those because they like you; we get those things because our union negotiated those benefits.'"

The crowd of Delta workers, many of whom are close to Robinson's age when he began his career, erupted in agreement.

"That stuck with me all these years," said Robinson.

Delta Ramp Agents and Flight Attendants are quickly gathering the signatures needed to have a vote for IAM representation. The campaign, the largest union organizing drive in North America, is beginning to garner national attention.

On this morning, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 29, a surprise winner of the Democratic primary in New York's 14th congressional district, which includes LaGuardia, was on hand to support a union for Delta workers.

"I'm here to tell you today that if you all keep pushing, you too can get those signatures, you can get on that union ballot and you can vote to unionize Delta," said Ocasio-Cortez, who like a growing number of Delta workers worked multiple jobs to support herself before entering politics.

Ocasio-Cortez listened to the stories of Delta activists from New York and other hubs, including Atlanta, Detroit and Minneapolis.

"When I told her about my subpar health insurance and how it's denying my post-cancer follow-up testing, she immediately gave me a hug. She understands," said Masayo Tyner, a Delta Flight Attendant based in Detroit. "She lost her father to lung cancer. She understands, because she has lived it."

Despite the carrier's industry-leading profits, Delta is increasingly replacing full-time workers with part-time jobs, known as "ready reserves," that do not have employer-provided health insurance. The cost of health insurance has risen sharply for all workers and work rules change at the whim of management.

"I love Delta. I want Delta to succeed," said LaGuardia Ramp Agent Richie Kojo Owusu. "But I know that when you have a union, management respects you. You matter and your family matters."

Former Northwest employees like Robinson lost IAM-representation when the airline merged with Delta in 2009. He has lived the difference, and along with other Delta activists, Robinson is determined to win a union at the industry's lone carrier with a majority non-union workforce.

"I'd like to pay it forward to the younger people coming behind me," said Robinson. "When I started, this job was a career; almost everyone I worked with owned a home. I'm sad to say that many of the people I work with now still live at the home they grew up in."

It is now up to Delta workers themselves, with supporters like Ocasio-Cortez by their side, to finish what they have started and demand justice on the job.

“I believe that this is a fight we can win together,” said Ocasio-Cortez. “This is not about left or right. All of us deserve a living wage in this country.”

Activists like Julianna Helminski, a Delta Flight Attendant based in Minneapolis, appreciates the support of Ocasio-Cortez.

“She threw her support behind our IAM Delta campaign with a lot of enthusiasm and we accept her support in kind,” said Helminski.

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