

Conscience Stricken: How Life as a Scab Flight Attendant Got Curiouser and Curiouser...

Christina Macarthur saw them as her dad nosed the car up to the curb in front of the TWA terminal. There were maybe a dozen of them, in uniform, trailing each other in a long oval pattern as if circling the wagons, crossing paths right in front of the big glass doors of John Wayne Airport. The posts of their signs rested on their shoulders, directing the lettering skyward toward the planes landing and taking off. But as soon as people approached determined to enter those doors, they held the signs up in front of them, like enormous crosses warding off evil: ON STRIKE. To Christina, only recently out of her teens, they all looked about the same age: older ladies—30, 35—but nice looking, trim and well groomed, some of them walking in pairs and chatting with each other. The flight attendant walking the loop in her direction had on white tennis shoes; they looked incongruous with the dark navy skirt and jacket. Christina found herself staring, wondering if one wears stockings with tennies. The woman glanced in her direction; Christina quickly busied herself with her luggage. She felt the knot in her stomach tighten.

“Don’t worry, honey, it has nothing to do with you,” her dad said, squeezing her hand.

“Maybe they’ll think I’m just a regular passenger,” Christina said, wanting to believe him. She gave him a hug, and gripping her bag, head down, she slipped out of the car, willing herself past the picket line.

This was Christina’s second face-to-face encounter with unionism; a few weeks earlier picketers had blocked the hotel where TWA was holding job interviews. “Informational” picket, their signs had proclaimed—Christina had no idea what that meant. In the months before March 6, 1986—the last day of a federally mandated cooling-off period—TWA was lining up

replacements for the flight attendants expected to walk off the job. Anxious to undermine the company's efforts, union members—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—were proselytizing new recruits. The picketers had seemed so angry, yelling at her, running after her car as she drove away. Christina didn't even know what they said—the blood had been rushing in her ears so loudly she couldn't hear them—and anyway she was nervous enough just having a job interview. She could have kicked herself for quitting Disneyland. Everybody wanted to be a character—it was way more fun than loading people on rides—and she liked being Alice in Wonderland. With her long blond hair and tiny waist, she certainly looked the part, but she also *felt* the part; she could be sweet and smile big for hours on end. But Dwayne, her ex—though since the annulment she wasn't sure *ex-what*—was so sure they should get married and move to Temecula. Temecula! Too far to drive to Disneyland every day, but the apartments were cheaper than in Mission Viejo, and he could get her in at El Torito where he was bartending... he probably just wanted her nearby to keep an eye on her. Six months of misery—that's what she got, what she deserved for eloping. Of course he wanted to elope—he knew her parents would talk her out of getting married at 19! This new job was the best thing that could have happened; she'll be thousands of miles away from Dwayne in New York. She was glad to be going, she told herself. And glad she hadn't taken the job at Continental—they were sending their new flight attendants to Guam! But now she'd better find her ticket—first stop St. Louis, then on to Kansas City for training; she'd be in New York, her new home base city, in 18 days. Having worked up the nerve to cross that picket line, looking neither right nor left, Christina could not have anticipated finding herself an avid union supporter two decades—and many hard-won lessons—later.

In the months after the strike began Christina and most of the 2,000 other young men and women—kids, really, for the most part—hired to replace the striking flight attendants would look for ways to circumvent the picket lines, anxious to avoid the stares and glares, the name-calling, the constant clicking noises the strikers made whenever scabs approached with the little metal “crickets” they always carried, the squirt guns filled with bleach—one girl, hit in the eye by a picketer, had to go to the hospital. The new crews would often come and go through other airlines’ concourses, or change into and out of their uniforms in terminal bathrooms, fording the picket line in civvies. Some scabs, or “permanent replacement workers,” as TWA called them, were more confrontational, waving their paychecks out of crew bus windows at dejected-looking strikers tramping the snow down in front of employee parking lots. When, in order to prevent every one of the 5,700 strikers from being replaced, the small, independent union, the International Federation of Flight Attendants admitted defeat 67 days later, Christina hoped the nastiness was over.

Christina really couldn’t figure out what the strikers wanted; she knew nothing of work rules, benefits, insurance—and everybody in the company was so nice. The money wasn’t great but the job was so much fun and incredibly easy—she did not wonder why they weren’t serving food or why they did not charge for drinks and headsets onboard. The strikers called the newly-hired flight attendants “18-day wonders” because of their truncated training program, but the supervisors—who met every flight, walked the new crews to their gates, checked out the aircrafts and the safety equipment, and ensured they were adequately provisioned—said they were doing great. Christian assumed the free lodging (TWA had booked entire hotels for them), free limo transportation, and free full buffet meals three times a day—continuing even after they arrived at their new bases—was standard operating procedure. And why would anyone complain about

being away from home too much if you were in Las Vegas or Paris? The company was right, the strikers must be greedy; they could put TWA out of business without the new flight attendants!

Mostly, though, Christina didn't think about the strikers much at all. Mostly, she just had fun. The majority of the new flight attendants, like Christina, had moved away from home to take the job, so she had a pool of ready-made friends. With constant parties in progress it was like living in a college dorm, but with travel benefits. Seniority has always dictated the flight attendant's existence, determining where she lives, when she works, and what trips she flies. Without the senior flight attendants around to bid all the good trips, they found themselves in places they had only read about—London, Milan, Cairo, Brussels, Barcelona, Stockholm, Athens, Hawaii, the Bahamas; even the domestic cities—San Francisco, Santa Fe, New Orleans, Boston—were fun, and they were getting paid to go! Not yet 21, Christina was having the time of her life.

The silver lining had a cloud, however. The strikers started coming back to work. Just a few in 1986—TWA, court-ordered to take them back, refused to do so until there were “openings”—but more and more over the next three years. Sometimes Christina found herself on a long trip with a sharply divided crew, the tension thick; certain groups did not mix. About 1200 of the original flight attendants crossed the picket line in the months before the union's unconditional offer to return to work; “crossovers” they were called, or sometimes “crawl-overs” if—fearful of losing not only the strike but their jobs as well as the strike drug on—they had initially supported the union. The “full-term” returning strikers despised the crossovers and the “contingents”—ticket agents and other company employees voluntarily trained to step into flight attendant jobs the minute the strike was called—despised them more even than the “new-hire” scabs. Platefuls of lasagna found their way into tote bags. Flight attendants who had been close

friends for years did not speak to each other. Scabs would often find their luggage, called crew kits, had been mysteriously checked and was en route to Tel Aviv. Emotions ran high even off TWA property: when Christina and her crew traveled as passengers on an Eastern Airlines flight, deadheading to get to Boston to work their own flight, the Eastern flight attendants offered to stow their crew kits. After arriving in Boston, though, they found their luggage had disappeared, the Eastern flight attendants now not so friendly; Christina remembers she and her crew “ran like scared rabbits.”

The first returning strikers, too, found themselves a minority, segregated and isolated. Scab crews would leave hotels without them, reporting them as no-shows. Management made no secret of the fact that they were not welcome, supervisors threatened to “find ways” to get rid of them. Senior returning strikers were locked out of their home bases. Unable to begin and end their trips from the cities in which they lived, they were forced to commute thousands of miles to get to work, pass riding on home town flights crewed by scabs 20 or 30 years junior to them. As stand-by passengers, they traveled only if there was an open seat. Hostile agents and supervisors often ensured there were none. Strikers were disciplined so often for poor attendance, receiving “article 16s,” official notifications of intent to terminate employment, that the St. Louis airport gift shop started selling t-shirts emblazoned “Member of the Article 16 Club.” Everyone started carrying their own food.

For Christina, awareness began the first day she flew with Margie. Truly, before that day she thought flight attendants should not and probably would not be mad at each other for making “different decisions” about the strike. It was day one of a four-day trip, and not a pretty trip: many legs up and down, long days with correspondingly short layovers. It was Margie’s first

trip since crossing the picket line to reclaim her job. She cried for four days. She was a single mom, her little girl had cancer and she needed the medical insurance. But that was not why she cried. She cried because she crossed; she was a crossover. She cried because her name would be in The Book, the little black book of names that all strikers carried: names of scabs. She cried sitting on the jump seat for take-offs, she cried sitting on the jump seat for landings, she cried as the other flight attendants worked, she cried as passengers filed past her on the way to the lavatory. She did not want to get out of the crew bus, did not want to leave the terminal in Newark. She put her coat over her head; she didn't want anybody to see her. She told Christina: "My friends will hate me. I crossed the picket line. They will not understand." And she cried some more. Christina says, "She told everybody she did not want to be there, she hated the passengers, she hated the pilots, she hated flying with us. She was just nasty to us, but I felt so sorry for her." Christina never saw her again.

Christina did not understand Margie, but just a few weeks later she flew with another recent crossover, Diane, who had been back flying for two weeks. During a Chicago flight Diane would not get up, leaving Christina and one other new-hire to work the entire aircraft. After landing at O'Hare en route to New York, Diane told Christina, "I just can't work with you people." And she got off the plane. She went right back out on the picket line, knowing she would likely be fired. Left below FAA minimum staffing levels, the New York leg cancelled. Christina began to see events in a new light.

In the following months and for many years afterward, management unilaterally imposed whatever work rules—"rules du jour," the flight attendants called them—and pay cuts they chose. Christina saw that the honeymoon, apparently, was over. It gradually occurred to her she may not have understood the issues. Unable to afford rent under the new pay scale, flight

attendants were living 10 or 15 to a New York studio apartment. By the time the last of the striking flight attendants were recalled in the summer of 1989, TWA was closing bases and forcing crews to work enormous amounts of unpaid overtime.

More than three years after walking out, all of the strikers were back on the job. Now low on the seniority totem-pole and no longer picking and choosing their trips, Christina and her friends found their lives on hold as they served stand-by duty month after month. Whether from the low pay scale or the high pressure level, hundreds of disillusioned “permanent replacement” flight attendants decided they weren’t so permanent, and hung up their wings. Eventually only about 800—less than half—remained. Greatly outnumbered, the remaining scabs were ignored on board and ostracized on layovers. Christina remembers: “I started questioning myself, why am I even here, this isn’t fun anymore. It was so much fun at the beginning. It was scary when you landed and scary when you got on the plane, but once you got to Paris or Rome it was such a great job!”

Eventually, tired of subsistence wages and legal abuse from the company—and now with an all-too-keen grasp of issues like duty day limitations and arbitrary trip extensions—Christina came to support the union, *any* union, wholeheartedly. However, it was an untenable position for her; knowing she would be called a hypocrite, she kept her opinions to herself. When once, during a long, boring taxi many years after the strike, she complained about the worsening conditions for TWA flight attendants her veteran flying partner quipped: “You should be happy. We fought against this. We lost, you won. This is your prize; enjoy it.” Although tempers cooled over the years, the tension never totally dissipated—Christina still chokes a little when someone asks her “seniority”—the year she was hired—knowing that when she answers “’86,” the year only scabs were hired, the conversation will likely end.

More than a decade after the strike Christina and the rest of the TWA flight attendants—strikers, new-hire scabs, crossovers, contingents, and a very few post-1986-hires—found themselves in an even more pernicious environment—American Airlines had assimilated TWA. Having guaranteed acceptance of TWA’s employees as well as its assets to cut the deal, AA then stripped those employees of their seniority. The TWA flight attendants were at that time represented by the International Association of Machinists; the IAM had agreed to the deal on the promise of AA’s CEO to abide by a neutral arbitrator’s decision on the seniority issue. Once the papers were signed, American Airlines—supporting the position of their own flight attendant union—refused to do any such thing. “Stapled” to the bottom of AA’s 24,000-strong flight attendant seniority list, the remaining 4,000 TWA flight attendants once again found themselves at the bottom of a very large barrel, forced to rent commuter apartments and serve endless months on 24-hour call. The AA flight attendants, petrified that TWA flight attendants, with an average seniority of over 25 years, would bump them off of their pedestals, wore buttons proclaiming “Hired, not acquired.”

Facing a common enemy, the factions seemed to coalesce. Even so, when—in the post-9/11 world—the lay-offs started to hit the TWA flight attendants exclusively in reverse seniority order (last hired, first fired, and all the TWA employees were considered new-hires at AA), Christina realized attitudes had changed less than she had imagined. On her last trip before furlough two years ago, Christina found herself working with two very nice buddy-bidders from Toledo. When they learned she would be “on the street” the next day, they said to her: “Well, you deserve everything you get. Hopefully you will be on furlough for three or four years just like we were out on strike.” Christina, never an in-your-face type of person, said OK, that’s fine. The Toledo girls told her they had lost their farm in the strike—lost everything. Christina says

now: “I never told them ‘Well, I would go on strike now, I believe in your cause,’ because I don’t think you can say you would do that when you’ve already done the other thing. I didn’t even go into it. I just sat there and listened. They lost their farm.” Christina asked them if they thought they would be laid off; they said “No, we’re too senior; it’s never going to hit us.” They were wrong. Christina says, “They were still very angry, but I feel bad because they’re gone now, too.”

Still, Christina would like to have her job back. Approaching 40, she still looks like a flight attendant: blond hair now professionally maintained, cute figure, high-heeled sandals peeking out from designer jeans. She misses the travel, the flexibility, the camaraderie, the paycheck. She’d like to have a few nights a month by herself in a hotel room, away from her husband of seven years and her stepchildren, as much as she loves them. She’d like an excuse to occasionally beg off the duties of daily care of her grandmother with Alzheimer’s, weekly baby-sitting for her infant nephew, taxi service for her 15-year-old stepson, and the constant worry of mothering an 18-year-old screwed-up girl, her biological mother having given up on her several years ago. She is in her fourth and final year of sign language classes and works as an intern speech therapist for hearing impaired and special-needs children. She decorates her beautiful home overlooking Lake Mission Viejo in shades of taupe and socializes with her husband, who dotes on her. Still, she would like to have her job back.

Christina’s sweetness and dry sense of humor endear her to her friends. All four of her best friends are ex-TWA flight attendants; three of them are full-term strikers. One of the strikers, Sue, is married to an ex-flight attendant who was fired for beating the snot out of a mouthy male scab. And although they talk incessantly over coffee at Starbucks or at the gym, they never really discuss the strike. It was, after all, 18 years ago.

Recently, Christina once again found herself facing a picket line as she and her husband approached their local Pavilions grocery store. The cashiers had gone on strike after months of negotiations failed to produce an agreement on pay and benefit cuts. Along with Vons, Ralphs, Albertsons, Kroeger, and Safeway, Pavilions' doors were open only because of its hastily-assembled scab workforce. Among the Southern California unionized grocery chains, the smaller Stater Brothers was the only one to have reached an agreement with its employees. The scene takes her back. Determined, she strides forward. Surprised, her husband watches her approach the striking clerks; he smiles as he hears her ask in her pleasantest flight-attendant voice: "Excuse me, do you know where I can find the nearest Stater Brothers?"