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## Flight Attendants union led by Oregon-raised Sara Nelson

Sara Nelson – the leader of America’s largest flight attendant union – grew up in Oregon. Her father was a lumber mill worker. Her mother was a teacher. Nelson, a proud graduate of Corvallis High School, went to work as a flight attendant at United Airlines in 1996, based out of Boston. Today she’s president of 50,000-member Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), a division of CWA, AFL-CIO. The Labor Press interviewed her by phone Nov. 16.



**Not every union-represented flight attendant gets involved in their union. Why did you get involved?** It was six weeks into working at United and I hadn’t gotten my first paycheck. So I went into the company office and asked if they could help. And the response was ... “I’m sure you’ll get one next time.” Somehow I made it through the next two weeks, but at the end of two weeks, I didn’t get a paycheck again. I went back to the office and asked someone to help me, and I started to get the same rhetoric. All of a sudden I had this tap on the shoulder. I turn around and there was someone standing there who looked just like me. She was wearing the same uniform and she was asking me how to spell my name. She handed me a check for \$800, and she said, “Number 1, you go take care of yourself, and Number 2, call our union.” I did call our union, and I had my paycheck the very next day. But I always tell everyone that I learned everything I needed to know about our union in that moment. What I learned that day with that fellow union member who

stood up for me was that you have to have an advocate. You cannot stand there alone. When I called the union office, they asked me if I would be willing to do some work. I had no idea that people said no. I was so honored that they would ask me to do something. That was the hook. When you get involved in something and you see that it’s not operating at its full potential, for me that was about jumping in and making it even better. That’s what flight attendants had done for 70 years. It used to be that you had to quit if you got married. You had to quit if you got

too old, if you got too fat, if you were not the right color or gender. And all of those issues were pushed back on by the union. So flight attendants identify with the Association of Flight Attendants because it’s the union that formed the career. It wasn’t the airlines. It wasn’t the companies. And as I learned about our union and the democratic process that the founders of our union set up, I fell more and more in love with it. I was very proud of the fact that I was a member of a union that celebrated dissidence, and was willing to listen and learn and grow from that.

**Do you encourage people to fly unionized airlines?** I really appreciate that some of your readers might be willing to choose union carriers, and the good news is that we in the airline industry are a highly unionized workforce. In the Pacific Northwest, flying on Alaska Airlines is great. They’re a great airline and they have been proud members of our union for over 60 years. And they have won incredible battles at work, including being the most progressive on maternity leave and the ability to have safe and clean space for lactation at work. United Airlines as well. And Virgin America is in the middle of a merger with Alaska; they will soon be AFA members.

**On the other side, are there airlines that you choose not to fly because of their attitude toward the workers or the union?** Yes: Delta Airlines and JetBlue are

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### Annual labor law conference in Portland Jan. 27

Mark your calendars for the annual Oregon Labor Law Conference, to be held Friday, Jan. 27 at the IBEW Local 48 hall in Northeast Portland. Now in its 21st year, the conference typically sells out. The deadline to register is Dec. 30.

For more information, visit [www.laborlawconference.com](http://www.laborlawconference.com).



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