

## A new player awaits seat

All sides agree Obama's pick for mediation board a good move

By Julie Johnsson | Tribune reporter  
March 30, 2009

Airline unions are counting on [President Barack Obama](#) to tilt labor policy in their favor as they hammer out new contracts with five of the six largest carriers.

But observers think Obama's approach to looming labor showdowns in the airline industry, which are all the more taut for their implications for national transportation, likely will be nuanced and driven more by pragmatism than ideology.

[United Airlines](#) begins contract negotiations with all of its airline unions in April, the first since pressing workers to give up more than one-third of their pay and their retirement benefits during the industry's dire downturn earlier this decade. American, Continental, Southwest and [US Airways](#) already are deep into contract talks.

"These are major negotiations," said Joshua Javits, former chairman of the National Mediation Board. "Enormous care is going to have to be given to navigating them through the troubled waters."

Obama has been quick to establish himself as a friend of labor, naming former pilots union chief J. Randolph Babbitt as head of the Federal Aviation Administration on Friday. And Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood sought to end a three-year pay dispute with the nation's 15,000 air traffic controllers.

But for the position with the greatest direct impact on how airline talks proceed and the leverage that unions will be allowed to deploy, Obama this month turned to Linda Puchala, a former union leader with a reputation for fairness and top-notch mediation skills, nominating her to be a member of the National Mediation Board. Puchala, who served as an adviser on [Obama's transition](#) team, is hardly a firebrand who brings a pro-labor tilt to the board, say those who know her.

"She's even-toned, even-minded," said Javits.

Puchala's nomination must be confirmed by the Senate. She could not be reached for comment.

A former president of the largest flight attendants union, Puchala has served as a senior mediator for the mediation board during the past decade and is widely respected by both labor and management for her grasp of industry issues and her skill at defusing problems.

"It is rare that you have somebody who comes from a union background, who's been a mediator for the board for so long and who is so universally well-respected by management," said Jerry Glass, president of F&H Solutions Group and a former executive vice president for US Airways.

Puchala spent five weeks last year leading talks between [American Airlines](#) and its pilots union at the request of the mediation board and won the respect of both sides.

"In our experience during past negotiations, we have been impressed with Linda Puchala's knowledge of the Railway Labor Act and have found her to be fair and consistent in her approach to mediation," said Mary Frances Fagan, spokeswoman for American Airlines.

The three-member board plays a critical role as a referee when airline contract talks turn ugly. While emotions can run high, and already do at United and American, workers are prohibited from striking until the process has run its course.

Board members are appointed by the president and ratified by the Senate. By law, one member must be from a different political party than the others. Puchala will replace Read Van de Water, previous chairman of the board and an appointee of former [President George W. Bush](#).

There is no timetable for contract talks under federal law until the board declares the two sides to be at an impasse. This triggers a 30-day "cooling off" period, which in reality is when strike plans heat up. The president can intervene after this point to avert a strike or to urge the two sides to reach an agreement.

Some in labor felt that the board under Bush was reluctant to declare talks at an impasse, which would have given unions greater clout.

"I don't think this means the board will be siding with labor by any means," said Sara Nelson, spokeswoman for United Airlines' flight attendants union, speaking of Puchala's appointment. "But for the past eight years, we haven't been given a fair chance at anything."

[jjohnsson@tribune.com](mailto:jjohnsson@tribune.com)