

In a rare move for the airline industry, Air France picks a female CEO

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When the leaders of global airlines posed for a photo in June, there were 25 men in dark suits and a lone woman in the last seat on the far right.

That could be changing, but very slowly.

Air France announced Wednesday that Anne Rigail will take over as CEO next week. Rigail, a 27-year company veteran and currently an executive vice-president, will be the first woman to lead the French carrier, which was formed in 1933. Parent company Air France-KLM Group will continue to be led by a man, however.

Few women have run large airlines. Carolyn McCall was CEO of British low-cost carrier EasyJet for seven years until leaving this year to run British broadcaster ITV. Christine Ourmieres-Widener, the woman in the June photo of CEOs, leads Flybe, a European regional airline that has fewer than 100 planes.

In the United States, Air Wisconsin, a regional airline that operates United Express flights, is led by CEO Christine Deister, and another regional, Cape Air, has a female president, Linda Markham.

But no major U.S. carrier has ever had a female CEO, and only

a few women hold other top jobs. In May, JetBlue Airways named Joanna Geraghty president and chief operating officer – the No. 2 job. Tammy Romo has been chief financial officer at Southwest Airlines since 2012, succeeding another woman. Elise Eberwein is an executive vice-president at American Airlines.

As of June, there were just 18 women holding down jobs of CEO, president or managing director at airlines around the world, according to the Centre for Aviation, an Australia-based airline industry research group. That is unchanged from a 2010 survey.

Women in the industry have said airlines need to do more to recruit and promote women, provide better mentoring, and encourage those who take maternity leave to return to their careers.

The International Air Transport Association – that’s the group whose leaders were pictured in June – has declared gender equality a priority. The group reported in March that only 3 per cent of aviation CEOs are women, compared with 12 per cent in other industries.

It didn’t help, however, that the association’s new president, Akbar Al Baker, the CEO of Qatar Airways, suggested that women aren’t up to the job of running an airline.

“Of course it has to be led by a man, because it is a very challenging position,” he said at a news conference. He later apologized.

As the new CEO at Air France, Rigail will certainly have her challenges. The airline faces contentious wage negotiations with pilots and flight attendants and has been hit by a series of damaging strikes. The last CEO quit after union employees rejected his offer of small pay raises for the next four years.

In a statement issued by Air France, Rigail said she is

extremely honoured by the promotion. Benjamin Smith, the CEO of parent Air France-KLM Group, said Rigail has always paid special attention to employees, and he expressed confidence that the airline can meet its challenges.

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