

COVID-19: THOUSANDS OF AIRCREW REDUNDANT

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No rights for agency & self-employed pilots

Brussels, April 28th 2020.

“Agreement terminated”, “your services no longer required”, “your last salary may not be paid”. This is what thousands of ‘self-employed’ and contractor pilots and cabin crew have been told by airlines or staffing agencies, over the past few weeks. The COVID-19 crisis might have grounded most of the global airline industry, but the rights of atypically employed aircrew had no further to fall.

While governments across Europe scramble to provide unprecedented access to support funds to save airlines, furlough and short-time work schemes will not help one significant group of aviation staff: aircrew on precarious, atypical employment forms.

Such is the case with Norwegian Air: Last week, Norwegian’s crewing agencies left 4.700 aircrew (1,570 pilots and 3,130 cabin crew) unemployed overnight across bases in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Spain and the UK. These agencies, partly owned by Norwegian itself, are a convenient setup to keep crew at arm’s length from the airline. An airline benefits from maximized crew productivity, without any of the responsibility, and all the risk pushed onto the flying crew. Similar crewing agencies have become a familiar part of the aviation landscape. The same week, CAE Crewing Services Ltd informed their Spanish based crews operating in SAS Ireland that they were starting the collective dismissal process.

“Atypical employment in aviation is merely a smokescreen for regular employment with the attached responsibilities ignored,” says ECA President Jon Horne. “We have often warned that these broker agency set-ups and bogus self-employment schemes create a pool of ‘disposable’ workers with diminished rights and no access to labour laws. The COVID-19 crisis killed the last argument that the contractor model could be in some way good for workers. There’s nothing good about having no income, no job security, no employment rights. Not in normal times, let alone during a pandemic.”

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Wizz Air, another airline making extensive use of atypical employment, announced it was cutting almost 20% of its workforce and remaining frontline staff take a 14% pay cut – whilst its CEO boasts about the comfortable cash reserves of his airline. In a memo to crew, Wizz Air presents its criteria for laying off pilots such as “willingness to work on days off”, “absence history” and “cooperation

with the company”.

“Some airlines have built their empires on the backs of ‘self-employed’ crew and precarious contractors and agency workers, and thereby avoid paying social security contributions and shift all the financial risk and uncertainty onto the individuals,” says ECA Secretary General Philip von Schöppenthau. “Now, we see the result of this: thousands of pilots are sent home without the same support granted to employees, no prospect for work and many without any income. Those ruthless employers have left the people who wore their uniforms for years, those who are part of the hearts and souls of the airlines, out in the cold while the rest of society and business rallies together.”

“This crisis is a wake-up call. While Europe’s governments, citizens and businesses work together and sacrifice together, some European airlines take the benefits and toss their loyal workers aside,” says ECA President Jon Horne. “This kind of precarious, one-sided set-up must not be tolerated, now or after the COVID crisis: it is pure abuse of the employees, European taxpayers and our model of social security and prosperity. Any national or EU financial aid or support to airlines must be made conditional on socially responsible behaviour and acting in the public interest. To do otherwise means that taxes will simply line the pockets of unscrupulous airlines at the expense of European workers and citizens. Support should be available only to those airlines that commit to support real employment through the crisis, and engage in constructive and genuine social dialogue with unions.”

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Even more worrying is that this will disproportionately affect young pilots. A shocking 40% of 20 to 30-year-old pilots in Europe have no direct employment relationship with the airline they work for, according to a study. To make things worse, many of those young pilots are still paying back six-figure student loans from their pilot training and live from paycheck to paycheck.

“Right now, we see airlines with sufficient liquidity laying off atypically employed aircrew workers, just because it is easy to do so – pushing the individuals and their families into very precarious situations” says Philip von Schöppenthau. “Even when the market picks up again – those pilots will be the ones who will struggle to get back on their feet. I am afraid that very many – and even experienced pilots – will simply not manage to find a job, leaving an experience vacuum which will take years to rebuild.”