

European aviation sector is not in the clear yet

The European aviation sector needs stability and support to survive. The ETF urges European institutions as well as Member States to provide additional support measures to the European aviation sector and its workers. Even with vaccinations becoming more widespread in Europe, the devastating impact on the aviation sector and its workers continues.

The European aviation sector needs dedicated support measures in order to survive the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Air crews, ground staff as well as air traffic management workers have all been directly by the pandemic.

While the spread of the virus is slowing, and the vaccination rollout has been ongoing Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause difficulties for workers in the aviation sector. So far, the positive effects of vaccination programmes have not been mirrored in the sector, and the economy has been reopening very slowly, limited by continued travel restrictions and resistance to the return of freedom of movement. While travel restrictions are gradually being lifted across the region, passenger numbers remain significantly low¹. Aviation workers are now staring into another lost summer, and the consequences could be huge.

Continuous payroll support is needed

The aviation sector needs specific, dedicated measures to carry the industry to the next season. While many aviation workers have been furloughed and Member States provide them and their employers with various payroll support schemes, these programs are of a limited duration. The ETF recently concluded a survey of airport unions which estimated that 68% of airport-based workers are out of work, a 10% increase on the same group of workers at the end of 2020. This data showed a worrying rise in the number of layoffs, influenced by a growing number of redundancies in the sector.

Unfortunately the vast majority of state aid to aviation in Europe has gone to airlines, and come with “no strings attached”. Therefore workers have benefited very little from it. Despite receiving this aid, companies around Europe are choosing to spend this aid to substitute cash flow, while they restructure, furlough and lay off workers. All aid should benefit people not profit, and therefore is it vital that all dedicated support to aviation guarantee the quality and quantity of work in aviation.

According to recent forecasts by Eurocontrol, air traffic is not going to be back to pre-pandemic levels anytime soon. As the sector remain heavily affected, it is of utmost importance to preserve payroll support scheme beyond 2021 to protect the remaining aviation jobs and employment standards in the sector. Moreover, this will ensure knowledge and skills is retained within the sector, which will ensure a quick, safe and effective return to normal operations. Without ongoing payroll support, the industry risks being left without experienced and skilled employees, who may seek opportunities in other, faster recovering sectors. European aviation needs all possible measure now to provide opportunities and decent working conditions to retain its talent pool for the future.

Health and safety of workers at risk

¹ <https://www.eurocontrol.int/covid19>

While many aviation professionals have been dismissed or placed on furlough schemes, others continue working in worsening, stressful conditions and job insecurity. Workers are under an increased pressure as they are forced to work in reduced numbers, sometimes performing what used to be a collective task individually. Likewise, being exposed to contact with passengers arriving from high-risk areas leads to additional stress at work and translates into worsening physical and mental health conditions of aviation professionals. In the long run, workers are pushed to their limits not only physically but also mentally. Mental health of aviation professionals, performing safety critical tasks with passengers from high-risk areas requires special attention and deserves dedicated support programmes, more so during this global, unprecedented, and prolonged pandemic.

Unruly passengers incidents on the increase

Furthermore, even with low levels of flying, there are logistical problems aviation workers have been facing. It now takes longer than before for passengers to go through various health and security checks in the airports and when boarding. Likewise, passengers are required to comply with new, frequently changing sanitary and travel restrictions measures including complex quarantining, documentation and testing requirements which differ by country and even by region. This has led to incidents of passenger disruption including unruly behaviour, physical and verbal aggression against workers rapidly increasing. As passenger numbers grow, and the restrictions and complexity remain, this is set only to increase.

Capacity of the sector has to be maintained

European aviation is currently not in good shape. As pointed out by other social partners, the sector is not in a position to provide enough capacity should the sanitary situation improve and travel demand increase rapidly. The sector has been working with a significantly reduced capacity for some time now, and this has become the norm. In the long run, there is a serious risk of shortage of aviation workers available and trained to fill in the employment gaps the pandemic has left it with. It is of utmost importance to think about the future of European aviation in the long-term perspective, and crucially to plan for that future. Decisions made today have to take into account the needs of the sector tomorrow, and have to be made cautiously for the sector to be able to provide capacity post-pandemic, keeping in mind recruitment and training of new professionals will not be possible overnight. Investment cycles need to be maintained otherwise the future of European aviation infrastructure and skills is at stake.

The sector needs to get through the COVID-19 pandemic as fast as possible and it needs to emerge stronger, more resilient and sustainable. Lessons from the past show crises in the aviation sector are not a rare occurrence, rather, they are part of the sector whatever their nature. The sector needs to be rebuilt now more resilient than ever, able to face these and other potential threats and crises in the future. It needs more than ever targeted solutions and continuous support to survive and ensure a level-playing field in which workers from all sectors and companies can benefit from their work and dedication to the industry.

People at the heart of aviation

At the core of this survival is the aviation worker, who has and will always be essential to the industry. Support to the industry in the long-term can no longer be focused on improving profits or dividends, rather it must be focused on maintaining the quantity and quality of work in the sector. The maintenance of high-quality skilled work in the aviation industry will contribute to the overall recovery of the industry, travel and society as a whole. The Covid-

19 pandemic has provided us an opportunity to shift the philosophy of the aviation industry from an industry solely dedicated on creating profit, to one that can sustainably benefit society as a whole. The aviation workers of Europe stand ready to rebuild the industry, but governments, regulators, and employers must support our demands to build a new sustainable industry with workers at its heart.

