



EXHAUSTED PILOTS TELL CATHAY PACIFIC THEIR GROWING WORKLOADS ARE A THREAT TO FLIGHT SAFETY

News / Airlines



Flight [safety](#) is under threat as exhausted aircrews cope with increasing workloads, senior Cathay Pacific pilots have warned in a letter to the airline's management that is seen by the Sunday Morning Post.

Cathay responded by saying safety was its top priority. The carrier confirmed having received the letter, which it said "expressed some concerns".

According to the airline's most experienced captains in the 1,900-word letter, bearing nearly 100 signatures, rank-and-file pilots were "tired and worn out" as they were routinely hitting the cap on flying hours -- known as approved flight time limitation (AFTL) -- governed by Hong Kong's aviation regulator to prevent fatigue. This came after a rostering practices agreement between the airline and its pilots was recently axed.

One pilot who declined to be named so as not to breach company policy said aircrews working up to the maximum flying hours regularly risked an accident sooner or later.

"The AFTL is an ultimate barrier," the source said. "The concern we have is, if you're working right up to that barrier continuously, it's not sensible. It's like driving at the speed limit the entire time."

"You are generating cumulative fatigue the whole time and when you start your next duty, you haven't recovered fully."

The signatories of the letter said: "We feel strongly that these concerns need to be heard at the highest levels within the company and be placed on the record."

They cited a "recent fatigue-related incident" by a pilot. Cathay did not address the incident in a reply to the Post.

The Civil Aviation Department stressed aviation safety was its "topmost priority".

It pledged to seek more information from Cathay about the letter to ensure all requirements of the department were fully complied with.

Senior pilots penned the warning letter a week after their employer cancelled on August 12 an industrial agreement with their union dictating flying hours and minimum cockpit manpower levels.

"We the undersigned are writing to you to express our utmost concern and alarm at the recent termination of our [agreement], specifically the potential change in crewing levels and how this may effect fatigue levels and, by extension flight safety," the letter, addressed to director of flight operations Anna Thompson, said.

The senior pilots said they felt compelled to speak out "as custodians of a safe flying culture" within the airline and "have a responsibility ... to voice our concern" on what was happening.

The final sentence of the letter stated: "The way in which pilots are rostered for work needs to be fixed as a matter of urgency and needs to be fixed with the active participation of pilots, not by the unilateral actions of the Company."

The rostering of pilots had intensified because of a long-term chronic shortage of pilots, they warned. It also stated the growing workload contributed to illness and long-term sickness among the workforce.

An airline spokeswoman said: "We are looking at these concerns and engaging directly with the pilots. Matters which relate to safety are always dealt with in a formal manner and they receive our utmost attention. The safety of passengers and crew is the No 1 priority."

The airline said it had a fatigue risk management system, with the support of the pilots' union, to manage fatigue-related issues.

Cathay's pilot union, the Aircrew Officers Association, declined to comment directly on the letter because it was not initiated by the union. However, it said it had taken the lead to address the issue.

The Air Navigation (Hong Kong) Order 1995 requires that crew self-report possible fatigue and should not act as a member of an aircrew, Hong Kong's aviation regulator said.

A Civil Aviation Department spokeswoman said it found "no adverse trend" in the breach of pilot flying hours.

Of a fatigue-related aviation incident, the aviation regulator said it will press Cathay Pacific for details and ask "for the details of the referred event and will take follow-up action if necessary."

Days Off Taking-off

Pilots familiar with the contents of the letter allege they are forced to fly beyond the regulated flying hours allowed by aviation law.

Rest periods defined as a "domestic day off" (DDO) which formed the rostering agreement -- and supplemented the aviation laws -- could be converted into standby or duty within 12-hours notice.

The DDO comprises of a minimum of 34 continuous hours (including two local nights) free from operating a flight.

Cathay could swap the DDO agreement to help the airline recover from major travel disruption.

However, the source said that over time, the company has started "peppering" the roster with standby or duty, so effectively a pilot can be used with 12 hours notice anytime during the month, and claimed it could be used without being in breach of Hong Kong's Civil Aviation Department's laws governing flying hours to avoid fatigue among pilots.

This facilitated the roster instability, the source claimed. So the pilot's union attempted to halt the increase in rest-day conversions at the now-failed negotiations. After the pay deal was reached, Cathay withdrew the rostering agreement, and made the rest-day conversion a mandatory policy.

Cathay Pacific stressed it complied with the rules on flight operating hours.

Fatigue Management System Success

Cathay Pacific and its pilot body formed a fatigue management system, a committee, to oversee tiredness in the cockpit.

In one example of the committees work, it recognised overnight Singapore flights are operated by Hong Kong-based two-crew pilots, who report [to work] time of 0025 until 1040 in the morning - a 10hr 15 min continuous working day commencing at half past midnight.

"That is fatiguing," described one pilot.

"What the company decided is -- and this is sensible -- they found it was very fatiguing for Hong Kong-based pilots, but it wasn't very fatiguing for Auckland-based pilots because of their bodyclock [adjusted to early morning rather than nighttime], so the company is trying very hard to make it just the Auckland-based pilots [to operate two-crew flights], but when they use a Hong Kong person, they use a third pilot.

"Now that is sensible because we should be having dialogue about [fatigue situations], but we are now in the situation where the company has taken away our rostering practices and "it's our ball game and [Cathay] will adjust it as we feel".

Southern Australia Flights to Become Two-Pilots Only?

Cathay Pacific carried out a study - crewing Australia flights with two-crew instead of three, according to pilot sources. The new rules allow 2 crew to fly into southern Australian airports by night as well as by day, whereas, traditionally these were done by a 3-pilot crew. The length of these flights, approximately 9 hours to Sydney, is at the top end of the limit on flying hours for two pilots.

Current rules by Hong Kong's aviation regulator stated that two pilots could work up to a nine hour flight duty period (FDP) (effectively, an eight hour flight) during the day but only an eight hour FDP (seven hour flight) by night still flying during the hours of 2:00-5:59 a.m. before needing a 3rd pilot.

Under the new rules, there is no distinction between night and day, which means that many Australian flights which go through the night can now be crewed by two pilots, whereas before the flight needed third pilots.

Pilots argue aircrews cannot cope with the same workload during the night as the human bodyclock is being deprived of sleep.

Two-crew currently operate to Perth and Cairns, but the plan is to extend the rule to southern Australian cities including Sydney and Brisbane.

According to a pilot familiar with the matter: "The report [to study this move] said this won't work because the fatigue levels are huge. But it is legal. Just because it's legal doesn't mean to say it won't induce excess fatigue, particularly for pilots who are already tired before the start."

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