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Ground handling sector fights for its survival as more than half of airport-based workers are out of work

The European ground handling sector has been facing incredible difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. One year on since the virus was detected in Europe for the first time, only around 40 per cent of European based ground staff are believed to be at work. The ETF calls for immediate financial support to the airports and ground handling service providers in Europe to protect air safety and the workers' health and safety and wellbeing together with the necessary retention of their jobs and salaries.

European ground handling sector finds itself on the edge of disaster due to the ongoing pandemic, persistent and largely uncoordinated health and travel restrictions across the EU Member States and little to no aid explicitly designed for the aviation ecosystem, which would include ground handlers and overall airport-based workforce.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the ETF has been calling for an EU-wide plan to protect the entire aviation ecosystem, [including ground handling workers and airport infrastructure](#). Despite the pleas from all stakeholders active in the sub-sector, the ground handling service providers and their workforce have mainly been left out of state aid packages, fighting for survival without support. The results of this approach being applied across the EU are alarming.

The worst is yet to come

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on employment levels on the aviation workforce at airports and on the ground, the ETF has surveyed its affiliates. Based on the survey results, the **ETF estimates that 58,5 per cent of ground handling workers are out of work: approximately 23 per cent of the European airport-based workforce has been laid off while 35,5 per cent of the European airport-based workforce is currently on furlough**. While the survey only represents a fraction of the entire workforce, the proportion of furloughed and laid-off workers based data provided by the ETF affiliates' can be seen as an accurate reflection of the catastrophic state the European ground handling sector is in.

However, these alarming figures are just the tip of the iceberg. The extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ground handling workforce across Europe has been limited in some countries thanks to government support and furlough schemes. Crucially, agreements negotiated by unions at company and national levels have prevented even more jobs being lost. However, such unemployment schemes are usually designed as a temporary solution. When they come to an end, workers are let go. Several waves of dismissals have already taken place, and more are to come unless immediate action is taken.

European aviation safety at risk

Mass-scale job losses and furlough schemes will have adverse social consequences, increase occupation health hazards, and damage passenger safety. Many of the workers who ended up out of their jobs were the most senior, experienced and skilled staff members. Likewise, having a lower number of workers at work can lead to compromised health and safety

standards for the remaining employees in the sector, more so with an increasing pressure on cost-saving.

There have been cases of workers being pushed to perform certain duties - what used to be a collective task before the crisis - on their own during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating safety issues and putting their health and safety at risk. All these changes, combined with the departure of experienced employees, mean that the sector has lost decades worth of irreplaceable skills and knowledge.

Furthermore, permanent employees are being replaced by workers “on-demand”, temporary and agency workers, while others have seen their terms and conditions lowered as part of cost-saving efforts. Alarmingly, certain employers have tried to exploit the situation and make workers redundant without consulting unions or European Works Councils.

Future of European aviation uncertain

Today’s ground handling job losses will turn into a suffering industry tomorrow. The entire aviation sector will be facing the consequences in the long term. When a large-scale use of vaccines becomes a reality, the demand for travel will likely come back rapidly. However, the ground handling sector may not be able to respond to a rapidly increasing demand due to the lack of available, skilled and trained staff. Shortage of skilled workers will make it even more difficult to guarantee a smooth, coordinated restart across Europe when the times comes.

When the demand for European aviation comes back, the ground handling sector will have to start afresh and rebuild from almost nothing. Numerous workers who have been out of the job for a longer period of time will not be able to miraculously appear back at work from one day to another. Any restart to operations will increase the need for fast and effective training to make sure that the safety of European aviation is maintained.

Airports and ground handling service providers are as important to the aviation sector’s functioning as those sub-sectors who have already received the bulk of state aid. Even though they do not make headlines in the media, ground staff are essential for the safe operation of the aviation industry. It is time to protect workers in airports and on the ground.

The ETF calls for targeted support for all parts of the aviation ecosystem, particularly airport-based workers who have been wrongfully ignored in the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation plans.

The ETF calls on national governments and the European institutions to provide financial help to the airports and ground handling service providers linking it to job protection. Leaving the sector to fight this battle alone without any resources will be detrimental to the aviation industry but also air safety, and the workers’ health and safety and wellbeing. Member States must immediately draw up plans for recovery and resiliency of the ground handling sector in the EU. Ignoring these concerns will deepen the crisis in the ground handling sector and aviation at large, which will negatively affect the entire economy.

As the [ETF already stated on 24 March 2020](#), following the initial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis showed that blind liberalisation has heavily weakened the sector. We still have the opportunity to rectify the mistakes and sustain ground handling and airport-based workers who are fundamental for the restart of aviation as a driving force of the European economy.

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