

Brussels, 31 May 2023

Dear Commissioner Vălean,

Response to Council Agenda Item on Summer Disruption

Unfortunately, as the largest trade union organisation in the EU representing aviation workers, we are compelled to respond to your recent letter to Ministers on the 24th May which suggests that strike action is our biggest concern for the summer 2023 season rather than bad working conditions.

You open your letter by saying we need to avoid the chaos seen in the aviation industry last summer, and this is something we can all agree on. The ETF, along with many of our social partners, have been saying for over a year that the aviation industry cannot recruit people simply due to low pay and bad conditions. Many in the aviation industry seem unwilling to accept the reality that people have chosen to work in other sectors of the economy due to low pay and conditions, and that they are now competing with other sectors of the economy such as hospitality, tourism, retail and logistics for the same pool of workers. So far, the aviation industry has failed to raise salaries and conditions enough to adequately compete with these other sectors, and therefore people are leaving.

The problems are clear in each sector. For ground handling and airport operations, workers are not being paid enough to stay in the job. These workers are frequently exposed to precarious forms of employment such as temporary work, seasonal work and part-time contracts. They regularly work split shifts and those working on the ramp are regularly exposed to occupational injuries and to extreme weather. In the terminal, we have seen a noted increase in the number of disruptive passenger incidents including attacks on staff since the COVID pandemic, and the number of incidents has not decreased since the removal of COVID travel restrictions.

Amongst our air crew, we see less worker shortage, but there remains a tight margin with some airlines not having enough workers to staff ambitious summer schedules. For decades, air crew have had their salaries systematically reduced. The starting salary for many pilots and cabin crew in entry level airlines is now at or below the minimum wage. We have seen an increase in precarious employment here also, particularly with temporary work and bogus self-employment. The wet leasing industry is also leading the drive to social dumping which is further depleting conditions in the sector.

Lastly, your letter refers mostly to the ATM sector which is only now starting to see the chronic worker shortage faced by other sectors. Due to no recruitment during COVID, and a growing retirement bulge, ATM is running out of workers. We are aware that multiple Member States will effectively be unable to fully staff their airspace to pre-COVID levels in the next 12-18 months due to a lack of qualified ATM workers caused by the recruitment freeze. Unfortunately, we are already well behind the curve. The only solution to this is to recruit more workers who will have to do their training. But we should also consider the long-term prevention of a similar situation, by ensuring



ATM is financially secure enough to maintain high levels of employment that are needed to keep EU skies open. The ATM sectoral social dialogue is already working hard on the issues you refer to in your letter, including the creation of a '[Revised Toolbox for Successful Social Dialogue in ATM](#)' as part of a recent Commission funded social dialogue project. This guidance material will support social partners in reaching agreements around the most difficult of issues and we urge you to support its implementation.

The lack of staff should not come as a surprise. We have said been saying this since 2021, and in September 2022 we held a conference on '[Redefining the future of aviation](#)' in which we gathered workers representatives from all over Europe to discuss the future of aviation. Our suggestions then are still relevant now. We need to:

- Stress test companies for financial and operational resilience, and fine those who fail to meet suitable operational levels.
- Ensure that the real cost is paid in contracts and in pricing, which must include the cost to ensure:
 - Operational resilience
 - Minimum safety standards
 - Service levels
 - Environmental protection
 - Social legislation compliance
- Create agreed, accepted, and clearly defined social costs within the industry that need to be dispersed across all stakeholders who benefit from the associated services whether through public or private means. Including critical infrastructure such as ATM.
- Develop a clear understanding, acceptance and agreement that sectoral collective bargaining is the critical mechanism to deliver operational resilience, service levels and standards, as well as driving safety and compliance.

In reality, little has been done to deal with the ongoing social issues in the sector, and there have been no substantial changes in industry on the root cause of worker shortages since summer 2022. Therefore, we can only expect the same chaos to continue until real social improvements occur. To solve these problems, our above solutions need to be implemented, we need a revision of EU 1008/2008, and the Commission needs to take the lead to encourage dialogue to prevent conflict rather than further interfere on the right to strike.

We have long been calling on a greater role from DG MOVE on social matters in aviation, and while limited progress has been made, we are still a long way from a sustainable aviation operation. We need to fully understand how social issues impact aviation, and we need to promote engagement

between unions and employers to both prevent conflict and to improve recruitment and retention in the sector. Therefore, we are calling on Member States to ensure that the discussion you propose focuses on working conditions, staff retention and employment in the sector, not on further limiting the right to strike.

Yours Sincerely,



Livia Spera
ETF General Secretary