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Our vision for Civil Aviation

ETF Civil Aviation Section
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ETF Vision for Civil Aviation

We live in times of tremendous change and uncertainty. Established geopolitical relations, perspectives, and economic assumptions are being reassessed and reframed. In parallel, the effects of liberalisation continue to shape the aviation sector, increasing the vulnerability of the industry. It is against this backdrop that we, the ETF Civil Aviation Section, revisit our vision for Civil Aviation.

The world has not experienced peace and stability for some time. Wars and conflicts in and around Europe have restricted Eastern airspace, limiting access of European carriers to the Far East and distorting global competition. Hybrid warfare has made European aviation a target, raising serious cybersecurity concerns with a particular impact on air traffic management (ATM). The threat of war has also led to ambitious plans for rearmament in Europe, further straining European airspace due to increased military use.

These disturbing trends have only intensified following the arrival of various new populist and right-wing administrations. This has reinforced global instability and fundamentally altered the geopolitical and economic landscape, accelerating uncertainty and disorder. Long-standing alliances are being tested or abandoned. The significant geopolitical tension has already reduced cross-border travel between Canada and the US, and transatlantic travel patterns have been disrupted too.

Open and free international markets, long the foundation of the global economy, are now being dismantled under a barrage of tariffs and trade barriers. The idea of rules-based international trade is being replaced by increasing economic protectionism, sending shockwaves across the world.

These broader geopolitical and economic changes are mirrored in the development of the aviation sector. Labour shortages, the erosion of quality jobs, and automation are casting a looming shadow over the sector. We see contradictions in the traffic patterns as passenger numbers rebound after COVID-19. Many traditional European hubs are still struggling to reach capacity, while smaller regional airports and non-European hubs have attracted more traffic than ever before. This shift in passenger flows and long-haul hub traffic poses a grave threat to European aviation's global standing and future resilience.

In long-haul traffic, European carriers have tried to compete under the assumption of a level playing field. That assumption no longer holds true. The ETF Civil Aviation Section recognises the fact that we must adapt our vision and efforts to a new understanding of the future of European Civil Aviation – one where there is no such thing as a level playing field.

Policy must reflect this new reality. Now more than ever, we need to protect European aviation. This means creating favourable working conditions and fair wages for all aviation workers, by

engaging in collective bargaining and actively cooperating on health and safety issues. This also means continuing to influence political and technical decision-makers in shaping all relevant regulation at the national and European levels. On this foundation, we can build an industry that puts operations, safety, and resilience first.

Aviation was built on quality jobs and the highest of safety standards

Aviation is a high-skill sector and aviation workers are in high demand in the wider labour market. The last few years have proven that aviation workers have begun to use their labour mobility. Driven by years of declining working conditions, stagnant wages, and the erosion of quality employment, labour shortages have become a permanent feature, with workers looking for better opportunities elsewhere. Labour shortages and operational disruptions impact all fields of aviation, from air traffic controllers and ground handling workers to cabin and cockpit crew.

The loss of experience and knowledge is tangible, with negative consequences for the safety of operations. Higher levels of labour mobility may also affect unionisation, as precarious work and high turnover rates put additional stress on union mobilising and organising efforts. Labour shortages are further sharpened by the sector's inability to diversify both its recruitment base and at the management level. Women and youth are still subject to specific challenges and imbalances, in a context where broader Diversity, Equity and Inclusion measures are highly required.

The introduction of new technology, including automation, is a driving force in the transformation of quality jobs into new precarious, low-quality jobs, with limited career prospects. Technology should be used to empower workers, not destroy quality jobs. New technologies should be developed with the involvement of workers at all stages, with the role of the human using and maintaining the system at the heart of such developments. Implementation of new technology should be negotiated with trade unions before it is introduced.

The decline of working conditions, job security, and career opportunities is closely linked to the liberalisation of the industry and the constant tendering of services that have left the industry fragmented. To contest this fragmentation and social dumping, tendering must be subject to social conditionalities, including obligatory transfer of staff with no loss of wages, meaningful training, and collective bargaining agreements securing fair wages and working conditions, making aviation a viable long-term career once more.

Outsourcing, subcontracting, and leasing of services, including wet leasing, have become established practices in aviation. Once used as temporary and small-scale measures, they are now major business models in the sector, used by companies in all fields of aviation. The ETF Civil Aviation Section calls for the establishment of strong main contractor liability in civil aviation, ensuring that companies subcontracting or leasing services are held jointly and severely liable for the employment conditions of subcontracted and leased staff, including temporary agency workers. This includes clarity in applicable labour laws and full application of collective bargaining agreements to all personnel effectively working under the operational control of the main



company. In the field of air navigation service provision, we remain attached to integrated service provision and will fight any attempt to fragment and divide, for example, air traffic and data services.

Stress, work intensification, and fatigue-inducing performance schemes, together with harmful work environments, have riddled aviation with health and safety risks. Unruly passenger behaviour, including violence against frontline staff, is increasing. These risks are often discouraging people from joining or remaining in the sector. Much must be done to create a better, safer, and healthier work environment. This can only be achieved with strong, good faith cooperation between management and trade unions. In many places, staff and their trade unions are hardly represented in this work. That is not acceptable and must change. If management does not cooperate freely, they should be obliged to work with the staff's trade unions on health and safety issues.

Priorities of the ETF Civil Aviation Section (I):

1. Fighting labour shortages – focusing on staff retention and attractiveness of the sector, including increasing protection of workers during tendering, expanding CBA coverage, and reducing risks of automation, digitalisation, and artificial intelligence.
2. New technologies – ensuring workers' involvement in the development and implementation of new technologies, making sure that innovation empowers workers, meets the highest safety standards, and sustains quality jobs.
3. Demanding responsibility during subcontracting and leasing – companies subcontracting or leasing services, including wet lease, should be held jointly and severally liable for working conditions of subcontracted and leased staff, and CBA coverage should be extended to the latter.
4. Health and safety – management required to cooperate with trade unions on health, safety, and work environment issues, including mental health and violence from third parties, introducing or strengthening the protection of workers through training and support.

| Strengthening European Aviation

The economic outlook for the industry is harsh and margins are low. The economic hardships and uncertainty often end up burdening the workers of the aviation industry, threatening wages, job security, and working conditions. A sound economy for the industry is essential to provide fair wages, working conditions, and work environment over time, which in turn are the basis of stability and resilience for the sector.

The sector requires major investments. With these investment needs, the pressure to access foreign capital is increasing. The ETF Civil Aviation Section strongly opposes foreign ownership of European aviation as an open door to the undermining of social and safety European standards, more avenues for regulatory evasion, and the infiltration of foreign interests in such a politically



critical sector. The loss of competitiveness of EU carriers is not due to a lack of access to international capital but rather to the loss of level playing field with the rest of the world. The lack of profitability is also a major concern, especially in ground handling. This problem can be addressed, at least in part, through standardisation of key operations, such as turnaround activities.

The chronic lack of investment is also witnessed at the level of ATM. As flight numbers surge, the system designed to keep Europe's skies safe is under growing strain. EU policies continue to demand more with less, putting safety, sustainability, and workers' wellbeing in jeopardy. Meanwhile, airlines keep exercising their pressure by blaming ATM providers and their staff for delays and cancellations, distracting from the structural shortcomings of the regulatory framework itself. The regulatory mindset must change drastically. The current performance scheme, built on efficiency criteria and cost-cutting, is no longer fit for purpose. It must be reviewed with binding safety targets, substantial investment in ATM personnel, and a regulatory approach that values workers' contributions as central to safe, sustainable, and resilient air travel.

State aid should be turned into a tool for strategic investment in the development and resilience of European aviation. As such, the use of state aid should be subject to social conditionalities, ensuring that the states support companies dedicated to building a stronger and fairer aviation sector. Reshaping state aid from a stopgap measure to a strategic investment in European aviation will allow for better focus on connectivity, safety, and sustainability. This will make global competition fairer while providing additional stability and resilience to the sector.

Long-haul flights are the backbone of the aviation industry. It is troublesome to see European carriers and hubs losing market shares to third country competitors, often due to the lack of level playing field and unfair global competition. A European aviation strategy is necessary. Open Skies Agreements, such as the EU-Qatar one, must be revisited, renegotiated, or revoked where necessary. Future agreements must prioritise the protection of European aviation jobs, airlines, and airports. Access to the European market by third-country carriers must require compliance with European rules, standards, and values, in particular sustainability targets, overflight restrictions, and worker and passenger rights.

Priorities of the ETF Civil Aviation Section (II):

1. Ownership and control – protecting European aviation by opposing the facilitation of foreign ownership and control of European carriers, with risks to social and safety European standards
2. Reforming the ATM performance and charging scheme – ensuring that RP5 reflects the real challenges that ATM faces while respecting workers, protecting passengers, and putting safety first
3. European aviation strategy – aimed at shielding European hubs and carriers by imposing European standards on third country carriers operating in Europe, therefore preventing the harmful effects of political sanctions, overflight restrictions, and unilateral environmental obligations.

4. Reshaping state aid – from emergency tool to strategic investment, with social conditionalities attached, allowing for operations, investments, safety targets, connectivity through Public Service Obligations, and reducing the cost of sustainable aviation fuels.

| Change through union power

It is the firm belief of the ETF Civil Aviation Section that the aviation industry will not change without strong trade unions demanding change and fighting for it. We know that strong trade unions are the true driving force behind real, lasting change – whether it be securing fair subcontracting rules, increasing collective bargaining agreement coverage, or securing quality jobs across the sector. This is why building union power remains central to the ETF Civil Aviation Section's strategy going forward.

We need to increase our capacity, both by bringing more aviation unions into the ETF and by supporting existing affiliates to play a more active role at the European level. This means not only growing membership but also creating better conditions for participation. Engaging with the ETF must be simple, valuable, and rewarding. That includes offering practical support, through visits, guidance, and solidarity, including during industrial disputes. Participation must also be adaptable to each subsector's characteristics and each affiliate's conditions. Our work must be inclusive, drawing on the strengths and experience of both women and men, always with our eyes on the future, working to include youth representatives as well as planning for the next generation of section leaders. The work to identify and train future leaders, while respecting the democratic principles of the ETF, is of the utmost importance for the section's long-term stability and success.

Our internal work and meetings should evolve and be more participative, forward-looking, and inclusive, focused on shaping what comes next, not just reporting on what has happened. We must make international work more visible and understandable to affiliates. It should be clear that local, national, and European action support and reinforce one another. When unions act locally with international coordination, they strengthen ETF's voice in Brussels. This is how we build a united and effective labour movement in European aviation.

Priorities of the ETF Civil Aviation Section (III):

1. Growing union capacity and activity – more affiliates, more members, and more ways to contribute, including more outreach activities and rotation of meetings.
2. Deepening participation and influence – make engagement easier and more meaningful both internally and externally, for example in Social Dialogue.
3. Coordinating national and European action – local pressure and European advocacy working hand in hand.
4. Section leadership – succession planning through identification, training, and inclusion of future leaders in the section's work.



| Conclusion

The European aviation sector stands at a turning point. Years of liberalisation, combined with mounting geopolitical instability, economic pressure, and returning crises, have created a fragmented and increasingly precarious industry. Without coordinated and determined action, these trends will continue to undermine competition, jobs, and operational resilience. But this future is not inevitable. With strategic pressure applied at local and national level, together with coordinated advocacy at European level, we can shape a different path.

Our vision sets out that path forward. It is a call to defend and strengthen European aviation by rebuilding it on the foundation of quality jobs and strong collective bargaining agreements. It is also a call to our affiliates: to grow our capacity, to deepen our engagement, and to work more closely. By working together can we achieve the change needed, and ensure that aviation workers have the voice, rights, and protections they deserve.