AVIATION WORKERS' PERSPECTIVE

Summer is here – and so is a sharp increase in air traffic. Yet again, we see a rise in flight delays and cancellations due to the **structural limitations** of the European aviation system. Air traffic management (ATM), in particular, is put in the spotlight, deprived of resources to ensure fluid and punctual operations without compromising on the necessary levels of safety.

Meanwhile, airlines and institutions have started their **usual blame game**. ATM providers and their staff are the favourite target. Every year, this mediatic noise distracts public opinion and most decision-makers from the root causes of the problem.

Summer delays and cancellations are mainly the consequence of **extreme cost-efficiency policies for ATM** and **airlines' overly aggressive competition**. If we want to mitigate them, we must adopt substantial reforms, starting by raising the ATM providers' ability to hire and retain staff.

THE UNTOLD TRUTHS

📢 **Airlines' constant blame game against ATM operators is just for show**.

In Summer 2024, according to Eurocontrol, the average delay per flight was 5,4 min. From this, only 0,6 min was due to ATM capacity shortage. Airline-related issues were responsible for more than that (1,4 min), while most delays (2,5 min) were reactionary delays – naturally created by other delays in previous flights.

👷👷 **There is a structural mismatch between staff and traffic levels.** The network suffers of a structural shortage of air traffic controllers (an average of 5%) and other ATM professionals. The average cost of ATM services represents 4,5% of ticket prices. Hiring the required extra staff would only cost a 0,1% increase on each ticket, but this is currently blocked by EU cost efficiency policies. Simultaneously, there is a severe shortage of ground staff in most countries, continuously aggravated by worsening working conditions. There are simply not enough workers in every component of the aviation chain.

🌍⚠️ **The impact of climate change and geopolitical instability is ever-growing.** Every year, flights are more impacted by environmental events, both affecting infrastructure on the ground or turning sectors of the airspace too unsafe to navigate. On the other hand, a fast-changing geopolitical situation around Europe, especially since the Arab Spring, is responsible for constant altering of air traffic patterns. It takes 3-4 years to train an air traffic controller until they represent actual capacity increase. When traffic patterns change, ATM capacity cannot adjust immediately. Without overall capacity increase, any change in routes can reveal a new shortage somewhere.

📡 **The bet on technology is not delivering.** The development of new ATM technologies in Europe received EUR 1.3 billion of public funding in the last 7 years. While pushing to cut costs with staff, policy makers believed that new technologies would bring the capacity increase required in the network. This bet has simply failed. Multiple factors contributed to this, including the shortness of investment cycles and the overselling of the potential of such new technologies. Some publicly funded innovations are outright worthless for the real problems of the network.

⏰💰 **Absurd turnaround times and overly aggressive competition.** Airlines keep pushing the limits of reasonable service for profit. Several low-cost airlines have now established a 25-minute limit for turnaround (time between the landing of an aircraft and its new departure). This is an absurd target considering all the (dis)embarking, cleaning, fuelling and handling procedures required. This is the main cause of reactionary delays. In addition, every element is seen as an opportunity for profit, in particular luggage policies, which are confusing for passengers, leading to unruly behaviours and lack of compliance with safety standards.