



## **No more crisis management at workers' expense: Addressing the fuel crisis while restoring fairness and resilience in European aviation**

**European aviation risks once again responding to crisis through short-term cost-cutting measures repeating past mistakes—undermining workers, weakening resilience, and delaying recovery. Rising fuel prices and airspace closures are prompting capacity adjustments that may disproportionately impact aviation professionals. At the same time, structural imbalances in the Single Market and global competition continue to distort fair competition. We call for coordinated action by airlines, governments, and European institutions to protect workers, restore a level playing field, and build a more resilient aviation sector.**

This is neither the first nor the last crisis to affect aviation. Over the past decades, the industry has faced numerous disruptions, including the September 11 attacks, SARS, COVID-19, the Eyjafjallajökull eruption, the 2008 financial crisis, and the Russo-Ukrainian War, as well as ongoing tensions in the Gulf and Iran.

While each of these events has had a significant impact, air traffic has consistently recovered over time and continued its long-term growth trend. However, in response to such crises, airlines have often resorted to short-term measures, such as grounding aircraft and reducing their workforce.

As the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated, these short-term measures—which had a profound impact on aviation professionals at an individual level—have also created barriers to recovery and future growth. In particular, hiring freezes and large-scale layoffs of aircrew and, in some regions, air traffic controllers have contributed to a loss of experienced personnel. Combined with worsening working conditions in parts of the sector, this has been a significant factor behind the current workforce shortages affecting aviation.

Today, history appears to be repeating itself. In response to the ongoing fuel price pressures, several airline groups have announced plans—or are actively considering—grounding parts of their fleets to reduce operating costs and adjust capacity. While such measures may provide short-term financial relief, they are likely to have immediate consequences for aircrew, whose flying hours, income, and job security may be affected first. These reductions in operations can also have a knock-on effect on ground staff, including maintenance, handling, and airport personnel, as overall activity levels decline.

It is also important to stress that these crises are not happening in a vacuum:

- There is no level playing field within European aviation. This stems from regulatory and labour “forum shopping,” whereby airlines obtain an Air Operator Certificate (AOC) in a Member State with no genuine link to their principal place of business or operational activity. In doing so, they exploit more favourable regulatory, fiscal, and social regimes while conducting their real operations elsewhere, effectively bypassing meaningful oversight and undermining fair competition across the Single Market.
- This distortion is even more acute at the global level. European airlines are expected to compete on fair terms, yet they face carriers from other regions—most notably Gulf carriers—that operate under entirely different frameworks in terms of state support, ownership structures, and social



standards, including trade union rights and collective bargaining. This structural imbalance systematically disadvantages European operators and erodes the sustainability of the sector.

- The growing reliance on a limited number of external hubs and third-country carriers for long-haul connectivity exposes Europe to geopolitical risks beyond its control. Recent crises have shown how rapidly such concentration can disrupt global passenger flows, leaving travellers stranded across South and South-East Asia and requiring costly government interventions. Beyond regional impacts, this vulnerability affects key intercontinental routes, including between Europe and Asia, and further weakens the strategic autonomy and resilience of the European aviation system.
- While the sanctions imposed in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War are fully justified, their unintended consequences fall disproportionately on European airlines. The ban on overflying Russian airspace applies to EU carriers, while non-EU airlines operating to and from Europe can continue to use that airspace. As a result, European airlines are forced onto longer, more expensive routes, weakening their competitiveness and further tilting the playing field against them—even on flights carrying European passengers.

**We therefore urge all stakeholders to take responsibility and act decisively in the long-term interests of European aviation and its workforce:**

#### **Airlines**

- to commit to genuine, stable employment models that fully respect workers' rights, collective agreements, and fair working conditions across all operations
- to invest in workforce retention, training, and skills development, rather than relying on short-term cost-cutting measures that undermine the sector's resilience, safety, and attractiveness
- to ensure that crisis response measures are fair, proportionate, and do not disproportionately penalise aviation professionals

#### **National governments**

- to support the aviation workforce through robust labour protections and social safeguards, including effective emergency unemployment schemes and short-time work arrangements
- to ensure strict and consistent enforcement of existing rules on labour rights, social security coordination, safety, and employment conditions, and to close loopholes that enable regulatory and social arbitrage within the Single Market
- to strengthen oversight of airlines' operational and employment practices, ensuring a genuine link between place of establishment, operational activity, and workforce protections
- to enhance coordination between Member States in order to prevent a race to the bottom on labour and regulatory standards

#### **European institutions**

- to consider establishing a permanent or rapidly deployable instrument similar to SURE, which proved effective during the COVID-19 in protecting jobs and incomes
- to take decisive action to restore a level playing field within the Single Market, including by addressing regulatory fragmentation and combating social dumping
- to take stronger action at global level to ensure fair competition, including reciprocity in market access, transparency of state support, and respect for labour and social standards in external aviation relations



- to mitigate the competitive distortions arising from geopolitical measures, notably those linked to the Russo-Ukrainian War, so that European airlines and workers are not disproportionately penalised

*Recent experience has shown that crisis management in aviation too often comes at the expense of workers. In response, the ETF has developed a practical crisis preparedness toolkit for trade unions and worker representatives, providing guidance on anticipating and managing the impact of disruptions while safeguarding employment and working conditions. This resource underlines the need for coordinated, forward-looking responses that strengthen both workforce protection and sectoral resilience. More information on the toolkit and the language versions can be found at <https://www.etf-europe.org/ngb-trade-union-guide-a-new-tool-to-prepare-for-crisis/>*

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