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Position Paper

Enhancing Occupational Health and Safety Protections for European Cabin Crew

Introduction

The recent ruling by the **Social Court of Tenerife (Spain)** has highlighted the significant occupational risks faced by cabin crew. In this landmark case, the court granted early retirement to a cabin crew member due to health issues directly linked to the demanding nature of their work. The court recognized that the unique working conditions of cabin crew - such as irregular hours, exposure to toxic fumes, and high levels of stress - contributed to the deterioration of the crew member's health.

This ruling underscores the urgent need to address the occupational health and safety (OH&S) challenges faced by cabin crew. Despite this legal recognition, major gaps persist at the European level. Occupational diseases remain largely unacknowledged, dedicated healthcare systems for aviation professionals are insufficient, and airlines often fail to provide critical risk-related information.

EurECCA, the European Cabin Crew Association, calls for immediate action to rectify these shortcomings and ensure the health, safety, and well-being of cabin crew. This Position Paper outlines the unique health risks faced by cabin crew, proposes urgent actions to mitigate these risks, and emphasizes the need for a specific EU Directive on occupational health and safety for the **aircraft workplace**.

The Unique Health Risks Faced by Cabin Crew

Cabin crew operate in a highly distinctive work environment, exposed to a combination of physical, chemical, and biological hazards that are unparalleled in most other professions. The most pressing health concerns include:

1. **Aerotoxic Syndrome**

The bleed air system used in aircraft can lead to contaminated cabin air, exposing crew to toxic substances during fume events. Acute symptoms include dizziness, respiratory issues, and cognitive impairment, while long-term exposure has been linked to severe neurological damage. Despite mounting evidence, Aerotoxic Syndrome is still not recognized as an occupational disease in most EU Member States.

2. **Circadian Rhythm Disruption**

Irregular working hours, night flights, and long shifts disrupt natural sleep cycles, leading to chronic fatigue, hormonal imbalances, and mental health challenges. Studies have shown that night workers face a significantly higher risk of cardiovascular diseases and sleep disorders compared to day workers.¹

3. **Radiation Exposure**

Cabin crew are exposed to higher levels of cosmic radiation compared to the general population. This increases the risk of cancer, particularly breast and skin cancer, yet they remain excluded from adequate protections.

4. **Night Work and Cancer Risks**

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies night shifts as a probable carcinogen². While similar risks are recognized in other industries, cabin crew are often excluded from the regulatory frameworks that protect other night workers.

5. **Work intensification and stress**

High workloads, unpredictable schedules, and pressure to meet operational targets contribute to significant mental health challenges as well as to chronic stress and fatigue.

¹<https://www.news-medical.net/health/What-Are-the-Health-Effects-of-Working-Night-Shifts.aspx#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20well%20Destablished,disease%20compared%20to%20today's%20workers>

²<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2954516/#:~:text=In%202007%2C%20the%20International%20Agency%20for%20Research%20on%20Cancer%2C%20a,as%20a%20probable%20human%20carcinogen>



Urgent Actions Required

To safeguard the health and safety of cabin crew and ensure a sustainable aviation workforce, EurECCA calls for the following actions:

- 1. Official Recognition of Aviation-Specific Occupational Diseases**
European authorities must formally acknowledge the health risks associated with cabin crew duties, including cancer risks linked to circadian rhythm disruption, radiation exposure, and toxic air incidents. Aertoxic Syndrome must be recognized as an occupational disease.
- 2. Comprehensive Risk Mapping and Regular Health Assessments**
Systematic data collection and regular updates on occupational health risks are essential to formulate evidence-based policies. This includes monitoring fume events, radiation exposure, and the long-term health impacts of irregular working hours.
- 3. Transparency from Airlines**
Mandatory reporting on fatigue, fume events, exposure data, and health risks should be enforced to provide clear insights into potential hazards. Airlines must be held accountable for failing to disclose critical information that affects crew safety.
- 4. Implementation of Technical Safety Measures**
Advanced air filtration systems, chemical sensors, and rigorous incident reporting protocols must be integrated into aircraft design and operations to minimize exposure risks.
- 5. Health Monitoring and Preventive Programs**
Regular health screenings, education programs, and early intervention initiatives should be established to protect crew members from long-term health consequences.

The Need for a Specific EU Directive on Occupational Health and Safety in the Aircraft Workplace

EurECCA firmly believes that the implementation of a specific EU Directive on occupational health and safety (OH&S) for the **aircraft workplace under article 16 of Council Directive 89/391/EEC and also giving substance to clause 5 and 6 of Council Directive 2000/79/EC** is essential to address the unique risks faced by cabin crew. Unlike traditional workplaces, the aircraft environment presents a combination of physical, chemical, and biological hazards that require tailored regulatory measures. Currently, cabin crew operate under soft rules, non-binding recommendations, or company risk assessments that often lack oversight and fail to provide adequate protection.

This regulatory gap is contrary to **Article 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)**, which mandates the adoption of Directives in the field of safety and health at work for all types of workplaces. While Member States have the freedom to adopt stricter rules, the majority have failed to do so, leaving cabin crew and other aviation workers vulnerable to health risks without proper safeguards.

A specific EU Directive must recognize the **aircraft as a unique workplace** and establish clear guidelines for:

- **Air quality standards:** Mandating advanced air filtration systems and real-time monitoring of cabin air to prevent toxic fume events.
- **Radiation exposure limits:** Setting maximum allowable exposure levels for cosmic radiation and requiring regular monitoring and reporting.
- **Circadian rhythm protection:** Implementing strict limits on night shifts and irregular working hours, along with mandatory rest periods to mitigate the risks of sleep disruption and chronic fatigue.
- **Health monitoring programs:** Requiring airlines to provide regular health screenings and preventive care for cabin crew, with a focus on early detection of occupational diseases.

Such a Directive would ensure **uniform and high social standards across the EU**, promoting socially responsible behaviour among airlines and preventing unfair competition and social dumping. It would also provide a clear legal framework for the protection of cabin crew, ensuring that their health and safety are prioritized in this unique and challenging work environment.



Why This Matters

Cabin crew are the backbone of the aviation industry, working under hazardous conditions to ensure passenger safety and operational efficiency. Failing to acknowledge and address their occupational risks is both unjust and unsustainable. The absence of adequate protections not only threatens the health and well-being of cabin crew but also undermines the long-term viability of the aviation sector.

Call to Action

EurECCA urges European authorities, regulators, and industry leaders to take decisive action to close these regulatory gaps. Recognizing aviation-specific occupational diseases, enforcing transparency, and implementing preventive health measures will ensure a safer and more sustainable aviation workforce.

The time to act is now. EurECCA calls on the European Commission to propose a specific Directive on occupational health and safety for the **aircraft workplace**, in line with the principles of the TFEU and the EU's commitment to high social standards.

**EurECCA represents, protects and develops the rights and needs of all cabin crew
all over Europe.**

FLYING TOGETHER – PROTECTING EACH OTHER

About EurECCA: established in Brussels in 2014, the European Cabin Crew Association, EurECCA, represents, protects and develops the rights and needs of cabin crew all over Europe. It is composed of cabin crew unions from European Union Member States as well as accession and bordering states and represents some 23,000 cabin crew accounting for 60% of all organized cabin crew in Europe. EurECCA has no political connections.

EurECCA's work is around Cabin Crew working conditions, wages, social protection and health and safety at work.

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