

Pilots want to be able to take a break

Unrest and dissatisfaction prevail among the pilots of Dutch charter companies. They are increasingly pressured to operate a flight on days off.

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First the colleague who has to assign the pilots to the various flights calls. He needs an extra man quickly. You say 'I'd rather not' and hang up. Moments later your boss calls. Whether it can be arranged that you fly on your day off. After an adamant 'no', he, too, hangs up, sighing. It only takes a moment before the phone rings again. The boss himself with the announcement that the interests of the company are at stake.

A pilot who still wants to experience the transition from first officer to captain will not easily say no for the third time. And no one asks if he feels fit enough.

This is how an experienced commercial pilot describes the state of affairs at Dutch charter companies during the busy vacation period. He wants to move up the ladder, so he'd rather not have his name in the paper. There are too few pilots for more and more trips to sunny destinations. And so the request to use a day off for an extra flight is heard more and more often. This called 'consent', the collective labor agreement offers this possibility, but meanwhile at the airline *Martinair* two to three percent of all flights are carried out on the basis of 'consent'. The willingness of the individual pilot to jump in occasionally has thus grown in recent years into a structural part of the operational management. "But the *Martinair* pilots' willingness to go the extra mile has decreased considerably, as has their motivation," writes pilot and flight instructor E. Folmer in the July issue of '*Op de bok*', the magazine of the *Dutch Airline Pilots Association* (*VNV* in Dutch). It gives him "pain in the heart" to see an airline like *Martinair* "slide downhill like this".

In a week and a half, the *VNV* will meet with its members to discuss the (excessively) high work pressure. In anticipation of any decisions there, the association's board has sent a letter to *Martinair* and *Air Holland* pilots advising them to "exercise restraint" when carrying out extra flights in their spare time. That advice was in response to the unrest among charter pilots that came out earlier this week. A day later, the *Belgian Pilots Association* reported that its members are also very dissatisfied with the increased workload. And since yesterday, the cabin crew of charter airline *Transavia* has also joined in the collective lament. According to the pursers and stewardesses of this airline, the equipment they have to work with is inadequate.

Immediately after the first expressions of dissatisfaction by the pilots, which also mentioned that it is about the safety of flying, the *Dutch Department of Civil Aviation* (*RLD*, *Rijksluchtvaartdienst* in Dutch) contacted the organization of commercial pilots. "Just indicate where the pain is," the *RLD* informed. A spokesperson for the *Ministry of Transport and Public Works* reported that no violations of work and rest times were found during the latest inspections by the *RLD*. "Rather, there is evidence of social boundaries being crossed," he believes. *VNV* president *P. Griffioen* makes a comment: "The legal regulation is already thirty years old. It still allows working days of sixteen hours without a break." According to him, urgent consultations with *Martinair's* management have resulted in the airline doing better. "They had too few people for all the scheduled flights. That led to too high a

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workload," *Griffioen* said. Incidents have not been reported to him so far. Whether that says anything is the question. In the *VNV* magazine pilot *Folmer* writes that his colleagues haven't written any trip reports for a long time now, "because nothing is done with them anyway". A report like that is meant to point out what went wrong during a flight. According to *Folmer*, communication within *Martinair* is inadequate.

The cause of the shortage at this airline [*Martinair*] is mainly the backlog in training. These are multi-day meetings where pilots are taught to work together better as cockpit crew (*cockpit resource management*). In this way they hope to further reduce the *human factor* as a possible risk on a flight. In past accidents and incidents, the *human factor* has always played an important role. The training courses are therefore necessary, but anyone who participates in them cannot fly. Then the call is made to the colleague who is sitting at home enjoying his rest for two days.

According to *Martinair*, the backlog in training has been more or less eliminated, so we'll watch it for a while, *Griffioen* says. At *Air Holland* several flights have been outsourced to other companies in recent weeks. In this way the airline managed to keep the workload at an acceptable level.

It is also important that these are charter companies with employment contracts from the time of 'tramp shipping', which means as much as flying whenever there is a cargo to be picked up. Within that, there was plenty of room for exceptional working hours. "But that exceptional has become more and more regular, increasingly the maximum effort is planned," say the pilots. Pilot and flight instructor *E. Folmer* in '*Op de bok*': "There is tremendous grumbling among the 'crews en route'. The feeling of discontent is being fed to a great extent."

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