ENHANCING INNOVATION IN AVIATION: A LABOUR PERSPECTIVE

(Presented by ITF)

INTRODUCTION

In the aviation industry, innovation needs extend beyond mere technological advancements; they encompass a holistic transformation of the industry. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) emphasizes the importance of redefining innovation to include systemic reforms that prioritise economic, social and environmental sustainability. The current industry model is heavily fragmented with a complex web of independent service companies, contractors and sub-contractors engaging in discrete services that together form the aviation service chain. While discrete, these heavily interdependent services are necessary for the safe operation of air services. Unfortunately, this heavy fragmentation with little regulation (especially on the ground) and intense competition between airlines, airports and aviation service providers has created an industry characterised by economic fragility, contract flipping, demand/ supply challenges and low incentivisation for long- term innovation, especially in aviation services.

The "A New Deal for Aviation," proposed by the ITF, serves as a comprehensive framework that identifies the core issues within the industry and offers a framework to create a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable industry.
At its core the ITF recommends social dialogue, with collective bargaining at its heart, to be embedded into the processes of innovation- from systemic innovation to technological innovation. This human- centred approach facilitates the continuity, stability and overall sustainability of the industry.1

SYSTEM INNOVATION

Structural changes in aviation in terms of ownership, operation and business models, characterized by extensive deregulation, have demonstrably weakened the industry's resilience. Privatisation has fragmented the service chain, leading to inconsistencies in service quality and safety standards. Additionally, it has contributed to a decline in wages and working conditions, resulting in poor labour standards and consequent staffing shortages across various sectors within the industry.

The ITF recommends the establishment of national tripartite aviation bodies, including employers, regulators and union representatives from across the aviation service chain. Similar bodies should also be established or strengthened at global and regional bodies. These bodies must be empowered to develop and implement aviation policies and review existing policies to ensure adaptability. Such coordination and cooperation will be a significant innovation in the industry and facilitate the ability to avoid, mitigate and respond to crises.

Empowering airport authorities and resourcing labour inspectorates is crucial to ensuring coordination and robust operating standards at local level. Airport authorities must have the ability to set minimum entry requirements, operating standards, coordinate healthy and safety regimes and convene tripartite forums at local level to facilitate forward planning and responsive operations.

INNOVATIONS IN SAFETY

Operational safety and a safe and healthy working environment are interrelated. **2** Given the safety critical nature of aviation, the development and application of preventative and remedial measures to ensure a safe and healthy working environment are therefore crucial.

At its heart, health and safety regimes must be rooted in a 'just culture', which allows workers to access appropriate, effective and timely legal recourse, remedy and complaints mechanisms. Non- punitive, confidential reporting systems will support system-wide safety innovations by encouraging the workers that operate the aviation system to report risks, hazards and incidents without fear of punishment, thereby allowing early identification and remedy/recourse.

Airport-wide health and safety bodies are another innovation that will increase occupational health and safety and therefore operational safety by convening operators and trade union representatives from across operations and concessions at the airport to ensure cohesion, cooperation, prevention and innovation.

The promotion of a 'just culture', and airport wide health and safety bodies will support ensuring safe staffing levels, mitigating fatigue, developing robust operating procedure, safety management systems and other practices that can enhance constant innovations to improve safety.

INNOVATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Technological innovation will be significant in the industry's initiatives to address climate change and achieve net zero by 2050. Workers can play a significant role in identifying and supporting measures towards environmental sustainability.

In Argentina, the airport operator AA2000, together with trade unions that represent workers at the airport, have established national and local committees to identify and develop initiatives that reduce their airports' carbon footprint. The forum has ensured a continuous and consistent drive towards environmental sustainability, based on social dialogue. The move also ensures that as sustainability initiatives are deployed workers at the front line of their deployment are already supportive and able to highlight their needs, such as training or reskilling, in deploying them.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Technological innovation, particularly within the aviation industry, is a multifaceted issue that requires a delicate balance between progress and the protection of workers' rights and safety. The "New Deal for Aviation" underscores the necessity of integrating worker input in the technological transformation process, ensuring that advancements serve to augment rather than diminish the quality of their work environment. This participatory approach not only fosters a sense of ownership among workers but also acts as a safeguard against the misuse of data they produce.

Digitalisation and other technologies bring forth a spectrum of opportunities for increased

efficiency and sustainability. However, it also presents challenges, such as the risk of job displacement, the deskilling of the workforce, embedding inequalities into algorithmic processes and at worst, compromising safety track records.

The focus of technological innovations must primarily be improvements in safety -both operational safety and occupational health and safety-. Transparent, measurable research and development, including labour impact assessments, should be the starting point for any technological innovation initiatives.

Technology can aid decision making, minimise mundanity and improve health and safety outcomes for workers. Where innovation does this, it has the potential to enhance aviation operations and the attractiveness of the industry for employment and retention. The deployment of technological innovations currently, without consultation or negotiation and with minimal forums for non-punitive feedback from the workers who deploy them, is in many cases having negative consequences on the workforce. The integration of productivity algorithms in various sectors of the industry, including baggage handling and onboard sales, is a testament to the relentless pursuit of efficiency in the aviation industry. These algorithms, designed to optimize operations, have indeed revolutionized the way tasks are managed and executed. However, the increasing reliance on such technology brings with it a significant concern: the intensification of work pressures on employees. As these systems demand faster and more consistent performance, workers may find themselves under relentless scrutiny, leading to heightened stress levels and potential burnout.

The discourse of technological innovation in aviation must be considered. Current discourse, for example, that advertises ‘contactless airports’, ‘automation’ etc, also have negative consequences on the attractiveness of the industry for employment. Especially for jobs with high levels of initial investment, the possibility of being automated out of a job can be a disincentive for entering the industry.

Responsible deployment of technology can significantly enhance operational efficiency. However, its development and deployment must include social dialogue at every stage. Workers who engage in the work processes daily are crucial to identifying the needs, risks and potential consequences of technological innovation. It is also often workers’ labour that produces the data to support decision- making. The uses and limits of such data must be negotiated with trade union representatives to ensure privacy is protected, and misuse avoided.

The ITF’s remote towers policy3, for example, outlines workers’ recommendations and consideration for the deployment of remote towers in aviation systems.

CONCLUSION

The aviation industry stands at a pivotal crossroads, where the trajectory of its growth and evolution is influenced not only by technological advancements but also by a growing consciousness of the human elements that sustain it. The ITF has been instrumental in highlighting the need for a holistic approach to innovation, one that integrates the rights of workers and the imperatives of environmental sustainability into the core of aviation's progress.

As the ITF continues to champion the cause of workers, its advocacy is not a solitary endeavour. It requires the collective effort of stakeholders across the spectrum, including airlines, other types of aviation companies, governments-regulators, and civil society at large. The path to innovation in aviation is thus a shared journey, one that necessitates meaningful social dialogue, partnership, and a shared commitment to a set of values that transcends individual interests.

The emphasis on social dialogue is particularly significant, as it fosters an environment where diverse voices can contribute to shaping the industry's future. It is through such collaborative platforms that consensus can be built around the need for reforms that are both progressive and inclusive. The ITF's approach underscores the belief that innovation should not be an end but a means to achieve a more just and equitable world.

The ITF, as the global voice for aviation workers, can support social dialogue at global level around innovation and engage to support social dialogue at local and national level. The aviation industry's response to the ITF's call to action will be a testament to its readiness to work towards a holistic recognition of sustainability- across economic, social and environmental paradigms. As we look towards the horizon, it is the collective will to innovate responsibly that will determine the legacy of this generation and shape the experiences of those to come. The journey ahead is not without challenges, but with a clear vision and a steadfast commitment to principles, the aviation industry can soar to new heights -ones where the sky is not the limit, but the starting point for a journey towards a more sustainable and humane world.

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1 Conclusions and recommendations on the promotion of decent work to shape a green, sustainable and inclusive economic recovery for the civil aviation sector, International Labour Organisation, April 2023.
2 Conclusions and recommendations on the promotion of decent work to shape a green, sustainable and inclusive economic recovery for the civil aviation sector, International Labour Organisation, April 2023.
3 https://www.itfglobal.org/en/resources/safe-skies-itf-approach-remote-tower-operations