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5 November 2010

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

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Dear Secretary,

Re: Pilot training and airline safety including consideration of the Transport Safety Investigation Amendment (Incident Reports) Bill 2010

I commend the Committee for initiating this inquiry into pilot training and airline safety. The issue is an important one worthy of attention and reform.

Our submission seeks to highlight the safety issues currently facing ASU members in the aviation industry. The submission will specifically deal with terms of reference (i) and (j).

Yours faithfully

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ASSISTANT NATIONAL SECRETARY

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[enc](#)

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Submission

The Australian Services Union is the largest Australian union covering workers in the aviation industry. Our members work in check in and operations, call centres, retail reservations in maintenance, freight, catering, IT, finance and administration at a wide range of companies; Qantas, Jetstar, Virgin Blue, Regional Express, Qantaslink, Singapore Airlines, United Airlines, Emirates, Malaysia Airlines, Thai, Garuda, Cathay, Air Niugini, South African Airlines, Air France – KLM, Air New Zealand and twenty other overseas airlines. We also have members who work for contractors in the industry like Menzies Aviation Services and Toll Dnata, and Airfreight companies such as Australian Air Express.

We are concerned about a number of practices in the aviation industry that pose a threat to worker and passenger safety; these are the prevalence of air rage, and use of electronic check in machines.

Air rage

The issue of air rage against customer service agents is one that is raised time and time again by our members. Air rage is disruptive passenger behaviour which can range from the failure to obey safety instructions to verbal harassment or physical assault directed at airline staff.

In 2004 the ASU conducted a survey of customer service staff working at airports about the prevalence of air rage in Australian airports. 96% of respondents had experienced air rage while at work, with 33% experiencing air rage on a daily basis. The incidents of air rage included cases of stalking, and physical assault. Several respondents said they had been spat at, punched, grabbed at and pushed and had objects such as mobile phones thrown at them.

The ASU conducted a follow up survey in 2008 to inform the union's response to the Aviation Issues White Paper. The survey showed that air rage continues to be a problem. Of those surveyed in customer service roles 81% has experienced air rage at their airport. While this is a slight improvement on the 2004 responses, it is clearly still an issue at our airports.

One survey respondent commented that:

I worked in Australian airports for QANTAS in both domestic and International Terminals. Recently I have re-located to London...I think the worse ground rage I ever encountered was at Qantas Domestic Brisbane Airport. Hopefully by the time I am ready to return to OZ the travelling public have calmed down.

When asked what they thought makes passengers angry and violent at Australian airports, survey respondents identified a number of issues. The biggest issue was

long waits in queues (90%) and then not enough staff (79%) and a lack of understanding of ticket restrictions (78%). A majority of respondents also cited 'Affected by alcohol', 'excess baggage control,' 'excess baggage charges' and 'baggage cut-off times' as causes of air rage. .

90% of respondents in customer service roles said they had received no training as to how to deal with hostile and abusive customers. Only 13% answered that they had received training.

Air rage is particularly prevalent at low cost carriers. A 2004 ASU survey of Jetstar employees showed Jetstar employees experienced a higher rate of air rage than employees working for premium carriers. The 2008 ASU Aviation Issues Survey found of the sample of employees working at either Virgin or Jetstar 82% had experience air rage. Low cost carrier employees cited a lack of understanding of ticket restrictions (90%), not enough staff (82%), baggage cut off times (82%) and excess baggage charges (82%) as the major reasons for air rage incidents.

Over many years the ASU has advocated for measures to reduce the rates of air rage in our airports. These have been put to airlines, airports and government, at all levels from committees in the workplace through to government inquiries. Some of these are as follows:

- Customer Service Agents need ongoing training that is monitored by the Government.
- Airlines and airports need to increase signage in check in areas and terminals that details penalties for abusive behaviour.
- Increase penalties for offending passengers.
- More police
- Reduce access to alcohol at airports
- More staff to reduce queues
- Clearer explanations of ticket restrictions

The case for increased staff training was put well by one respondent to the 2008 survey.

Training to handle hostile and abusive people should be mandatory for ALL companies within the airport environment to provide to their employees. The amount of calls to the police or security would decrease if employees were taught how to diffuse the situation before there is a physical threat or violence.

This issue is relevant to the safety of pilots, flight attendants and passengers in the air, as all too often those who are disruptive on the ground continue this behaviour

in the air. To ignore the issue on the ground and to not resource staff at the front line is to jeopardise safety in the air.

Electronic check in machines

It is becoming increasingly prevalent at Australian airports that passengers check in via an electronic check in machine, rather than interacting with a Customer Service Agent. The increased use of these machines has removed the need for passengers to verify their identity or interact with a human being before boarding a flight. We believe this represents a serious threat to aviation security and safety.

Firstly, we do not know who is travelling on planes – the identity of passengers is never checked. In contrast aviation workers are subject to extensive background checks before they commence employment, and must have an Aviation Security Identification Card displayed at all times in secure zones at airports. The ASIC regime is currently under review and being improved to protect against the threat of the ‘trusted insider’. We accept the need for security checks for workers, and our members are generally happy to comply. After all they have the most to lose from an attack on our airports given they work there on a daily basis, and their continued employment is reliant on public confidence in the safety of airplanes and airports. However they expect that security vigilance to be applied consistently, to both workers and passengers. This is not currently occurring; we know nothing about the passengers travelling through secure zones in the airport and boarding domestic flights.

Passengers are now so confident that their identity will not be checked that they will fly under a different name. We have become aware of a business practice where all flights for the company are booked under one person’s name in order to accumulate frequent flyer points. This practice reveals just how rarely passenger identity is checked. Business wouldn’t take the risk of booking the ticket under a different name if they didn’t think they could get away with it. Business, and passengers know that it doesn’t matter what is says on the boarding pass, David Jones will be able to travel on John Smith’s ticket without query.

It begs the question why we bother collecting intelligence and generating watch lists for dangerous individuals? Given we no longer check identity, people on these watch lists are free to travel through our airports undetected.

Some airlines have a practice in Australia of banning passengers who have been disruptive previously – one has to ask what stops them from travelling under another name to thwart this process. It would appear nothing.

Australia is out of step with the rest of the world in this practice; at overseas domestic airports the identity of passengers is often checked several times before being allowed to board a flight. Yet we blithely proceed to allow passengers on domestic aircraft without any identity check – cursory or otherwise.

The electronic check in machine creates a further security risk as it removes the need to interact with a Customer Service Agent. Customer Check in was once considered an important first layer of security. Whilst a passenger was checked in, the Customer Service Agent could evaluate their demeanour and response to basic security questions such as ‘did you pack your own bag?’ This security value in this interaction should not be understated. Customer Service Agents can identify suspicious behaviour and passenger uneasiness. If we identify and report this behaviour early in the check in process it reduces the risk of passengers with ill intent gaining access to the secure zone of the airport and boarding flights.

Electronic checks in machines have ensured that passengers barely interact with a human being through the check in and boarding process. The only point at which a passenger is stopped is at a security X-ray point where security personnel are concerned with checking for prohibited items and don’t have time or the responsibility for assessing a passenger’s demeanour or engaging them in conversation. The electronic check in machine has removed a critical layer in our security regime; we believe this poses a risk to the safety and security of the airport and flights.

Conclusion

Air rage and electronic check in machines compromise the security at the first stage of a passenger’s journey through the airport. Apart from being a security issue for the workers in the check in area, if a passenger is engaging in air rage at check in, they are also likely to be disruptive in the secure area of the airport and on the flight, and it is here that they pose a threat to the safety and security of the airport, other passengers, pilots and flight attendants.

We need to make sure passengers who commit air rage are apprehended at check in and in serious cases of abuse, charged, so they can’t proceed into secure zones of the airport. Similarly electronic check in machines pose a security risk, passengers can now pass through airports without verifying their identity or undergoing any sort of behavioural evaluation. This too potentially allows people with ill intent to board flights.

When addressing the issues of security in the aviation environment these two issues cannot be ignored, and action is needed by government to address them for the safety of aviation workers and the travelling public.