BA and Norwegian Air Shuttle cut costs, but at what price for flight attendants?
International Labor Organisation estimates aviation sector has a 0.1% profit margin. With world's airlines eager to cut crew costs – is life as a flight attendant getting worse?

Photograph: Tom King/Alamy

As a British Airways flight attendant with a quarter-century of service, John (not his real name) has a regular schedule. He can decide the type of flights he wants to work on: he’s opted for the short-haul fleet. He can decide when he wants to be on holidays. "I'd love to stay until I'm 60," he says.

But during John’s career with BA, flight attendants' working conditions have worsened. "Our basic salaries and allowances have stayed the same, but our hours have increased and there's less time between flights," he says. "Every year it gets a bit tighter."

Low-cost carriers are setting the trend. One of them, Norwegian Air Shuttle, plans to use cheaper US-based flight attendants rather than Norwegian ones for its new transatlantic flights. "We are concerned that Norwegian's announcement to hire US-based flight attendants to staff international flights undercuts labour laws, paying outsourced workers a fraction of what Norwegian flight attendants earn," the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA) said in a statement.

Since its long-haul operations are based in Ireland, Norwegian can bypass its home country's strict labour laws. "Ireland was not chosen because the country has specific rules and regulations that allow the use of American or Asian crew, like some politicians and unions have claimed," Norwegian spokesman Lasse Sandaker-Nielsen says. "Norwegian could have based its long-haul company in any other European country and still used American and Asian crew, the way several other European airlines have been doing for years. The only exception is Norway and partly Denmark, who so far have opted to keep outdated special rules within this area."

Norwegian already employs a Thailand-based crew. Ryanair, Europe’s most profitable airline, classifies its crew as working in Ireland because they fly on Ireland-registered aircraft, even though they live in several dozen Ryanair base cities around Europe. The practice lowers the carrier's labour costs.

Ryanair director of communications, Michelle Lowe, says that the airline's flight attendants enjoy better rosters, better pay and much better promotional opportunities and job security than at legacy airlines, who are cutting jobs and pay. "We have a waiting list of over 5,000 qualified pilots and cabin crew who wish to join Ryanair for our great conditions and secure jobs."
It's easy to understand why airlines are eager to cut crew costs. According to figures from the International Labor Organisation (ILO), the aviation sector only has a 0.1% profit margin (pdf), and human resources are one of airlines' few variable labour costs. According to the ILO, in 2008 Ryanair carried 9,679 passengers per employee and EasyJet carried 6,152, whereas Lufthansa carried 1,172 and KLM–Air France, 690.

"Legacy carriers get a disproportionate share of their revenues from business passengers, and some people are still willing to pay for that [personnel-intensive] service," says Peter Turnbull, professor of human resource management labour relations at Cardiff Business School. "Legacy carriers can compete with low-cost carriers, but they feel that they have to make changes to their labour conditions."

For the same reason, notes Arthur Wheaton of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, some airlines are trying to get more out of their fleet and crew by minimising time between flights. "That means that crews and flights are often delayed. That creates a frustrated atmosphere, and the people who are getting that frustration are the flight attendants and the people behind the counter."

According to 2009 report by the International Transport Workers' Federation, between 2000 and 2007, 80% of crew saw their flight hours increase, and during the same period abusive behaviour towards crew and ground staff grew.

Other airlines have also adopted the Ryanair's policy of charging for anything beyond the ticket: according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), between 2006 and 2008 such so-called ancillary revenues skyrocketed from $2.3bn (£1.4bn) in 2006 to $10.2bn. By 2010, they represented 12% of airline turnover in 2010, compared to 22% at Ryanair.

Some Middle East-based airlines, meanwhile, have added a new component to flight attendants' lives. The ITF recently criticised Qatar Airways' policy of requiring flight attendants to obtain the airline’s permission if they want to get married (the airline did not respond to a request for comment). And Emirates don't allow flight attendants to invite anyone outside their family to the staff apartments where they stay.

The changing conditions are altering the nature of the job, even among relatively generous employers like BA. "Among flight attendants with my contract, the annual turnover is 2%," reports John. "But among those with the new contract [in place since 2010], it's 20-25%. And that's what BA wants. They want you to come in for two years, have good fun, get exhausted and leave. I joined for a career. They hate us because we stay."

A BA spokesman told the Guardian Sustainable Business, the airline's turnover rate "for new entrants is in line with industry levels and after the first year is lower than other airlines."

Airlines have no problems filling their cabin crew positions. Norwegian reports that 5,500 people have applied for its 300 new cabin crew jobs.

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