

Pilots' Unions Ramp Up Opposition To Reduced-Crew Studies

Sean Broderick May 04, 2023



Credit: Airbus/Qantas/James D Morgan

Three major pilots' unions are taking aim at projects underway at Airbus and Dassault as well as the European Union [Aviation Safety Agency \(EASA\)](#) that are exploring reduced crew operations concepts and, eventually, large aircraft designed for a single pilot.

"The reduced crew operation initiative is probably the first and only development we know when both manufacturers and regulators are not looking into making aviation safer. This is concerning," said European Cockpit Association (ECA) President Otjan de Bruijn, a [Boeing 787](#) captain at KLM. "Both a leading manufacturer and [EASA] are very active players and it looks like they are working in lockstep."

De Bruijn joined colleagues Jack Netskar, president of the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA), and Jason Ambrosi, president of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), in a press event ahead of an IFALPA conference in Montreal. The three unions recently unveiled a [campaign against reduced-crew operations](#), including the idea of designing transport-category aircraft for a single pilot. They see the safety risks as outweighing any benefits an operator might point to, such as needing fewer pilots to fly the same schedules. But until now, unions had not publicly singled out specific projects or companies.

EASA's project, launched in 2022, is studying both concepts, under the banners of extended minimum crew operations (EMCO) and single-pilot operations (SPO). The goal is to "assess the issues and feasibility" of updating EASA regulations to permit EMCO and SPO in the future.

Pilots' unions have been vocal about the idea of cutting flight crews from two to one—a concept that would require significant changes to aircraft and flight operations standards.

But EMCO is far closer and is getting more attention from the unions.

One reason is research at Airbus looking at several different concepts, including permitting a single pilot on the flight deck during long-haul cruise flight phases, starting on the A350. The project, formerly dubbed Project Connect, was re-named extended minimum crew operation—nearly identical to EASA's research project.

If adopted, the concept could permit a single pilot to be on the flight deck for 5 hr. of a 7 hr. flight from, say, Western Europe to the eastern part of North America.

"This brings with it unacceptable risks to flight safety," de Bruijn said. "There are many things which can go wrong and for the complex operations of an airliner in that kind of working environment, it's just inconceivable to be operated by one pilot."

Dassault is looking at [optimizing future business-jet designs](#) with advanced automation, such as auto-recovery modes for extreme circumstances such as wake turbulence, as well as extended periods of EMCO, where one pilot rests for longer than current regulatory guidance permits. Extending flight-deck parameters would represent a major regulatory change—the FAA does not permit any in-flight napping for pilots unless they are relieved, for exam



The union leaders acknowledge that few airlines have publicly expressed support for any of the concepts. But economic incentives of having fewer pilots could make the ideas more appealing, hence the need for their campaign.

“In our discussions with airlines in the U.S. and North America, they do not support the concept,” Ambrosi said. “They understand the increased risk and the safety aspect of it. So, the U.S. airlines aren’t behind it. Quite frankly, it’s hard to find anybody that says, ‘Yeah, we’re behind this concept,’ other than ... EASA and Airbus. I haven’t had an airline come to me and tell me that they support it.”

Instead, the manufacturers’ push to embrace automation, and regulators’ desire to work with them, seem to be the primary drivers.

“Airplane manufacturers see this high pace of automation, which makes a lot of things possible. But sometimes they create their own reality, and they think that this really is a solution for non-existent problems,” de Bruijn said. “It’s also very interesting to see in Europe, the regulator and the airplane manufacturers, Dassault and Airbus, working so much on this together. The question is of course, why? It’s by definition not making aviation safer.”

[AIRBUS](#) [DASSAULT AVIATION](#) [EUROPEAN UNION AVIATION SAFETY AGENCY \(EASA\)](#)

Copyright © 2024. All rights reserved. Informa Markets, a trading division of Informa PLC.

