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Fórsa National Secretary
Challenges Facing Aviation Workers
Opening statement at the
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Networks
Tuesday 9th February 2021

Fórsa represents over 80,000 members, including around 5,000 workers in airlines, airports, air navigation bases, aviation regulatory bodies, and air traffic control.

Eleven months of pay cuts, lay-offs, redundancies and job insecurity - and continued uncertainty about the future – has put aviation workers and their families under massive strain. For many, the mortgage and other debt incurred during this period will be a burden for years.

With no early end to travel restrictions in sight, thousands of jobs will remain at risk unless the State acts now.

While the industry and its staff have benefitted from State wage supports, Ireland continues to lack a European-style joined-up Government approach to underpin jobs in the sector, protect aviation infrastructure, and ensure the survival of a viable post-pandemic industry.

This runs the risk that Irish aviation will be left behind when the rest of the world moves on, with potentially devastating implications for the national economy and employment in the aviation and the sectors and communities that depend on it.

It is highly likely – if not certain – that aviation will be among the last industries to emerge from this crisis.

Yet the Government has been slow to engage fully with stakeholders. Recommendations from the Taskforce for Aviation – and from this Committee – have been largely ignored.

This inaction is placing at risk an entire industry and the jobs and connectivity it supports.

Fórsa's written submission to this Committee gives a detailed assessment of the impact of the crisis across the industry, and contains a range of recommendations, both for the sector as a whole and for specific companies.

I want to draw particular attention to three industry-wide requirements:

First, we make recommendations regarding income supports, which acknowledge their contribution to the sector and its staff while highlighting the need for a flexible, industry-specific approach for this phase of the aviation crisis.

There is a strong risk that the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme, as currently constructed, will lack the flexibility required to underpin employment relationships in the sector – and this is essential if we are to position the industry to bounce back post-Covid.

Fórsa is proposing an aviation income support scheme similar to that in place in Germany, which enables employers to reduce hours rather than laying staff off, with Government income support for the time employees can't work.

Second, we emphasise the need for Government-led social dialogue with employers and unions to underpin a sustainable and thriving aviation industry as we emerge from the pandemic.

Thirdly, Fórsa is calling for the Central Bank to adopt European Banking Authority (EBA) guidelines for the extension of mortgage payment breaks in 2021. The European guidelines do not currently apply in Ireland, where the application process is slow and onerous. After 11 months of income reductions, and no early sight of recovery, this is placing avoidable strain on workers.

Ireland went into this crisis as a major force in global aviation, and our connectivity to the rest of the world plays a crucial role in supporting economic activity and attracting inward investment.

It is therefore crucial that we act collectively, to ensure that the industry not only survives the impact of this current crisis, but that it is fit to perform robustly as and when safe international travel resumes.

Fórsa's approach has been to work closely with aviation employers to maximise job protection.

But this approach cannot succeed without significant and continuing Government support and intervention.

The union continues to call for any such support to be contingent on the avoidance of compulsory redundancies and offshoring of Irish aviation jobs.