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Airline industry about to throw away 100 years of safety experience

In order to align with ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation) requirements, the European Aviation Safety Agency is proposing a regulatory amendment (NPA 2013-01) that if accepted, will introduce a new buzz word to the aviation industry, "SMS" Safety Management. AEI is extremely concerned about the effect this proposal will have on safety.

Over a century of progressive safety gains will be surrendered if the aviation industry particularly the commercial sector is allowed more freedom to self-regulate. Air safety is largely dependent upon the standards to which aircraft are maintained and operated. The current system used globally to ensure standards are maintained at an acceptably high level involves the licensing of highly qualified aircraft engineers who carry out and certify for aircraft maintenance as well as a system of scheduled maintenance and practices including training etc. which is supervised by the respective national aviation authorities.

Air Transport is possibly the most competitive and demanding of all industries, and faced with the pressures of the need to make a profit, it is understandable that boundaries can be pushed too far in order to get an aircraft into the air. Therefore the current oversight system necessarily places an element of restraint upon the operating and maintenance practices of airlines in order to prevent the operation of un-airworthy aircraft which may otherwise present a serious hazard. It is a fact of life that considerable "commercial" pressure to operate such aircraft does occasionally exist.

One element to protect against such situations is the independent (of the company) state licensing of Aircraft Engineers. That an engineer's judgement can be influenced particularly when that engineer is entirely dependent upon the favour of his employer for his job is understandable. It is the statutory authority of the Licensed Engineer that enables him to withstand such pressures thereby ensuring the highest standards of safe aircraft maintenance. Although his actions might not always be in the strictest financial interests of his employer, they are absolutely in the best interests of safety.

Similarly, supervision by airworthiness authorities often results in airlines being forced to perform maintenance and modification to aircraft which constitute a financial penalty but are essential to safe aircraft operation. Therefore it is with disbelief that proposals are being presented which reduces state controlled airworthiness oversight of commercial airlines. In other words the industry is being allowed more freedom to self-regulate. Clearly governments have lost sight of the fact that their primary responsibility is to protect their citizens.

The aviation industry led by commercial airlines has long followed a policy to eliminate the control of airworthiness by reducing the activities of airworthiness authorities to limited surveillance and abolishing the licensing of aircraft engineers. Airlines have been persistent in their lobbying of politicians in order for them to achieve absolute authority to determine what constitutes un-serviceability together with absolute authority and responsibility for airworthiness and maintenance standards in the individual airlines. It seems that safety management is proving to be just too attractive to the industry as it regrettably offers regulators an excuse to reduce budgets by backing away from exercising real oversight leaving operators much more flexibility to increase profit at the expense of safety.

Safety management should be a welcome addition to the safety oversight already in place but cannot be allowed to substitute it. The financial sector has recently shown us that there are consequences to reduced regulatory oversight on high pressure commercial enterprises. Money can be replaced, lives however cannot.

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