

Greek air crash raises serious safety issues

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On Sunday August 14 a Cypriot airliner, Flight 522, crashed near Athens with the loss of all 121 passengers. The plane hit a hill after both pilots were apparently incapacitated by a drop in cabin pressure. The plane was carrying 6 crew and 115 passengers, including an estimated 48 children on their way to an international football competition.

After the Cypriot plane failed to respond, the Greek air force scrambled jet fighters, which approached the stricken Boeing 737-300 at around 34,000 ft. The crews of the F-16 fighter jets reported seeing one pilot slumped over the controls as what appeared to be passengers or flight crew sought to regain control of the disabled plane. One of the flight attendants, Andreas Prodromou, had some experience piloting small planes.

Air experts speculate that the Boeing's air pressure had failed at high altitude resulting in sudden depressurisation. The plane dropped to a height of 10,000 ft and flew on autopilot. Greek fighter pilots were on standby to shoot down the plane if it threatened to crash into the middle of densely populated Athens. Before the aircraft could near a landing place its fuel ran out and it crashed into the hillside.

According to press reports, the German pilot of the flight reported problems with the cooling system of the plane's computer to Helios technicians shortly after take-off. Although such a problem can have far-reaching complications, the pilot declined to land and the aircraft continued on its scheduled journey. Although he informed the Helios company of the fault, the pilot refrained from telling Cypriot flight control. It remains unclear why the pilot and co-pilot failed to access emergency air supplies. The plane's badly damaged black boxes have been found and are being analysed.

At the start of last week, relatives of the deceased victims vented their fury on the airline—Helios Airways. Shouting “murderers”, relatives besieged the offices of Helios which they accused of allowing an unsafe aircraft to take to the skies. Greek police raided the airline's offices and the public attorney's office is preparing criminal charges against the company.

The Greek media reports that there have been a series of

problems with Helios' planes over past years, including defects of airplane air conditioning systems. On a recent flight from Warsaw to Larnaca, the same plane that crashed last week was forced to make an emergency landing because of technical problems. Passengers were taken off the plane suffering from respiratory problems. On August 13, another Helios flight on the way from Cyprus to the British city of Birmingham was forced to delay its landing following problems with its wing flaps.

The Greek crash was one in a series of incidents which, within the space of a week, have resulted in the loss of nearly 300 lives.

On Saturday August 6, a Tunisian charter plane—Tuninter ATR-72—ditched into the sea near Sicily killing at least 13 passengers. Some of the 23 survivors of the incident said the plane's two engines had gone silent, one after the other, in the seconds before the crash. Passengers barely had time to put on their life jackets before impact and reported on chaos in the cabin. Aviation investigators have said they are puzzled by the fact that both engines failed. Some reports point towards the use of cheap quality or watered down fuel in the motors.

Early on Tuesday August 9, a passenger plane crashed in a remote area of Venezuela killing all 152 passengers. The plane owned by the Colombian airline, West Caribbean Airways, departed from Panama for the French Caribbean island of Martinique. The last message from the cockpit came from the pilot who reported problems with both of the plane's engines.

In a fourth incident in Canada on August 2, 297 passengers and 12 crew members scrambled to safety just in time when their plane crashed on landing. The Air France Air Bus Flight 358 overran the runway at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, smashed into a gully and burst into flames. Witnesses said it was a miracle that none of the passengers died.

While there are a number of differences between the incidents, there is strong evidence indicating mechanical defect and negligence in the maintenance of the Cypriot, Tunisian and Colombian planes.

Both the Tunisian and Colombian planes had engine

problems. The Colombian McDonnell Douglas was out of service for a period in July because of technical problems. Passengers who had used the same plane the previous week also reported a number of technical defects, which led to delays while the plane was being checked.

The background to the Toronto crash is less clear. While some air officials in Canada have been quick to raise pilot error as the likely cause, other reports speak of possible damage to the plane as it set off from the Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Paris during a thunderstorm and landed in bad weather in Toronto.

While it would be premature to speculate on the precise causes, the crashes have all taken place against a background of ruthless competition, “liberalisation” and price cutting in the European, US and international airline industry. Faced with the additional burden of soaring fuel prices, there is enormous pressure on commercial airlines to cut corners, turn around planes faster and demand longer working times from pilots, ground crew and the planes themselves.

Helios Airways was a case in point. According to the *Sunday Times*, the company “joined the cut-throat business of no-frills airlines in 1999, when it became Cyprus’s first privately owned airline... Although the company met official standards, it faced tough competition. Demetris Pantazis, its managing director, has something of a reputation for being tough on costs.”

In comments to the *Australian* newspaper, Helios marketing manager Nicholas Anastasiades defensively declared: “It [the crash] doesn’t make sense. We’re not a Third World country. We are a member of the European Union and comply with all the European regulations. We know we’ve done nothing wrong.” The remarks simply point to the deeper systemic problem: deregulation, accompanied by intense market competition, has led to a serious compromising of safety standards.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, fundamental changes have taken place in European and world aviation in the name of the “liberalisation of the skies”. Governments have sought to privatise the airlines, which are then expected to fight for survival on the open market. European airlines have had to make themselves competitive, in particular in the US market, where air travel was deregulated almost 10 years earlier.

At the beginning of 2000, European Union Commission President Romano Prodi announced Brussels’ plans for telecommunications and air travel, declaring: “My aim is it to make Europe the place where business initiative can unfold most easily in the world.”

While the safety record of Helios has been subjected to considerable criticism, the Greek government is nevertheless determined to privatise the country’s only national

carrier—Olympic Airlines. The airline, which has already suffered cutbacks and rationalisation, is a slimmed-down successor to the debt-laden Olympic Airways. Greece recently signed a preliminary agreement to sell Olympic to the private New York-based investment group Olympic Investors-York Capital.

US regulators have raised no objections to the deal, although in 2000 the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) declared that Greek airline regulators were not following the standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). Privatisation and the race to maximise profits are increasingly taking priority over safety considerations.

For several years, European airlines have been synonymous with mass sackings, wage cuts, rising workloads and spectacular company collapses, such as those of Belgium’s Sabena airlines and Swissair. With established companies under pressure from cheap price carriers, the airline industry as a whole has singled out personnel for cuts and redundancies. Ground staff, mechanics and catering staff have been especially hard hit.

In the US, Northwest Airlines, which has lost more than \$3.1 billion since 2001 and continues to lose money under conditions of soaring fuel prices, is organising a massive strikebreaking operation against its 4,400 mechanics and cleaners. The airline is demanding sweeping concessions from airline workers totalling \$176 million a year, including huge wage cuts, cutbacks in pension entitlements and the elimination of 50 percent of mechanics’ jobs.

Just a week ago more than 1,000 ground and check-in staff employed by British Airways (BA) at Heathrow airport in London took unofficial strike action. They walked out in support of more than 600 catering workers who had been informed of their immediate dismissal by management. The industrial action quickly brought the airline to a standstill with BA grounding all its London flights.

The investigations into the Greek airline crash are still in a preliminary phase. There can be no doubt that it represents a terrible tragedy for the victims and their families. But while much of the media prefers to concentrate on the “personal angle”, any objective investigation of this and other disasters must closely examine—in addition to the immediate technical causes—the entire framework of modern air travel and the consequences arising from the “liberalisation of the skies.”



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