

The Germanwings Airbus crash: What is the state of airline safety?

Dietmar Henning
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An Airbus plane belonging to the Lufthansa subsidiary Germanwings crashed in the Alps in southern France on Tuesday morning, killing all 144 passengers and 6 crew members. Shortly after reaching its official flying altitude of 11,600 metres, the plane began to descend rapidly. The descent lasted eight minutes.

Pilots suspect that their colleagues were prompted by a sudden drop in cabin pressure to begin a sharp descent before they lost consciousness due to lack of oxygen. The descent to a lower altitude should have balanced out the drop in pressure. But it would seem the pilots either never regained consciousness, or did so too late.

However, it remains unclear why flight 4U9525 from Barcelona to Düsseldorf crashed. The security firms and companies involved in the investigation have declared that weeks or even months could go by before a precise cause can be determined, if one ever can be.

In light of the latest tragedy it is necessary to examine the state of safety conditions in the international airline industry.

The Airbus 320 is one of the most widely used aircraft in the world. Together with planes from the same family of aircraft, it is considered to be extremely safe. Almost 6,400 A320 planes have been provided to airlines since 1988. On Tuesday alone, around 3,000 A320s were in the air.

The plane involved in the accident was 24 years old, having been supplied to Lufthansa in 1991. According to company information, the last major safety check was performed in the summer of 2013, and the last minor maintenance was carried out on the day before the accident. Experts commented that the age of an aircraft does not play a major role in regular and carefully conducted maintenance. However, every round of maintenance is more expensive than the last.

According to *planespotter.net*, the average age of the Germanwings fleet is 23.8 years, while Lufthansa's entire

fleet averages 13.8 years. Lufthansa is attempting to exchange its aging fleet, but according to newspaper reports, they do not have enough capital to do so quickly.

The plane involved in the accident also remained on the ground on Tuesday morning for several hours in Düsseldorf due to technical problems. According to *Spiegel Online*, there was a problem with the nose landing door. This is the flap that opens and closes to allow the nose wheel to come out for landing. "However, this problem was fully resolved, meaning that as of 10:00 yesterday, morning, the aircraft was once again in regular service," a Lufthansa spokesman explained.

While the technology used in the aircraft is increasingly complex, experts are divided over its use. Although it ensures higher levels of safety, if it breaks down the planes are extremely difficult to fly manually. The so-called fly-by-wire technology in modern aircraft is designed so that it is increasingly computer technology rather than pilots steering the plane.

Interventions by the pilot are first checked by the safety system, with every action the pilot makes essentially being a request for the technology to determine whether or not it could produce danger. In this way, the risk of human error is supposed to be eliminated.

However, a major problem arises when the technology fails. In November of last year, an Airbus A321 belonging to Lufthansa flew from Bilbao, Spain, to Munich. A crash was nearly caused by icing on the sensors, which caused the sensors to supply incorrect data to the on-board system. In this case, the plane also made a rapid descent of approximately 1,000 metres per minute. It took considerable effort on the part of the pilots to switch off the automated system in order to bring the plane manually under control and save the lives of the 109 passengers and crew.

Lufthansa stated that following this incident, all sensors on the A320 series of aircraft would be replaced. But

warnings about the danger of icing on sensors on aircraft in the A320, A330 and A340 series had already been made by the European Agency for Air Safety (EASA) two years earlier. Despite these warnings, the close call last November was required in order to convince Lufthansa of the need to replace the sensors.

The growing range of technology demands a higher level of training for pilots. The pilots' trade union Cockpit has been criticising the neglect of such training for some time. The laws on training have been written for aircraft from the 1950s and 1960s.

Instead of altering the regulations to meet the safety requirements of passengers and crew, they are adjusted to meet the demand for profits by the airline companies. In October 2013, the European Parliament adopted a European regulation on airline service working time proposed by the transport commissioner that came into force in 2014.

According to the new regulation, pilots can be required to fly up to 11 hours at night. Along with the night flying time, the time spent waiting before a flight, so-called preparation time, is also included. The EASA, which is closely connected with the airline industry and companies, considers a maximum of 14 hours to be justified. In extreme cases, this can be increased to 22 hours, with the pilots on duty until landing.

Rather than the interests of passengers and crew determining policies in the airline industry, the lives and working conditions of the employees, and the safety of passengers are subordinated to stock markets and their demands for cuts in the airline industry

In the 1990s, budget airlines such as Ryanair and Easyjet entered the European market. Somewhat later, the airline companies from the Gulf states, including Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways, as well as Turkish Airways and Air China, began to compete with the European and American leaders in long-haul flights. Since then, the working conditions of employees and the safety procedures in the planes have been in a downward spiral. The burden of the competitive struggle for profits has been borne by the crews and passengers.

Germanwings emerged in 2002 as Lufthansa's competitor to the budget airlines. In the meantime, the process has gone even further, and Germanwings is to be shuttered and its routes taken over by the even cheaper Eurowings. Labour costs on Eurowings are reportedly 40 percent lower than for the remaining 5,400 pilots at Germanwings and Lufthansa.

The strikes by Lufthansa pilots, which have been

ongoing for almost a year, are directed against the company's strategy, led by CEO Karsten Spohr. He has made his position in the struggle with the pilots clear. For him, there is no right to good living standards and decent pay if share dividends are declining.

For the same cost-cutting reason, maintenance on aircraft is being reduced. *Zeit Online* cited a Lufthansa technician who is also responsible for Germanwings. "In the past, aircraft were maintained every day, but now almost all airlines only carry out maintenance every second day."

An air traffic controller told the WSWS that even aircraft with technical problems are sometimes allowed to fly. In case of safety problems arising due to the self-check by the pilot shortly prior to departure, the plane will be flown with the safety and back-up systems. Since a repair is cheaper at a domestic hanger than at another airport, it is better on the company's bottom line to fly such an aircraft back to the home airport to be checked over by the company's own technicians. In this way, the cost of a delayed or even cancelled flight can be saved.

Cuts are also made to fuel costs, sometimes through the use of modern technology. However, extremely risky methods are also used to push down costs. In July 2012, three Ryanair planes had to carry out emergency landings because they had too little fuel in their fuel tanks. Cockpit reported at the time that an increasing number of pilots at German airlines were being threatened with disciplinary measures if they used too much fuel.

The growing budget air travel market is leading to intensified competition. This does not only come at the expense of working conditions and pay of crews, but endangers the lives of thousands of passengers every day. As long as airline safety is subordinated to the demands and profits requirements of the airline companies and their shareholders, Tuesday's disaster involving the Germanwings plane will not be the last, regardless of what was ultimately responsible for the plane crash and the deaths of 150 people.



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