

PRESS RELEASE



To the media and to the air transport users

The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association of Spain (APCAE) would like to broadcast to the media and to the air transport users the following press release:

In the past months, the air traffic controllers of Spain have become, thanks to the minister of Public Works, Mr. José Blanco, the public enemy number one. He has practically accused us of being the cause of the hardship many citizens are going through, of the air transport crisis and of the financial illness of the Spanish airport operator and air navigation service provider, AENA; the same AENA that is building without an apparent justification “the best airports in the world”, even where it seems there is no need for them according to its low subsequent activity. The same AENA that utilizes intermediaries whose involvement makes the equipment that we use more expensive and the one which subcontracts services that could be done by its own professionals.

The inability of AENA managers to reach an agreement with our union representatives, made AENA give in immediately the leadership of the negotiating strategy of the new working agreement to the minister of Public Works -we are unaware whose initiative it was and the real goal-, a legal instrument whose function he seems to ignore as he has never been a wage-earner (apart from that of his political party he has supported since his twenties). But Mr. José Blanco, far from trying to unlock the mismatch behind closed doors and in the privacy of the negotiating table, has surprised all of us with slanderous statements. Using his same usual style that so good profits have reported him in the past, he has put us all in the spotlight of the Spanish citizens and threatened our own personal integrity and that of our families.

In his recurrent and controversial appearances in the media, Mr. Blanco, without hesitation, calls us all privileged and lazy. And without any shame, he compares our earnings with those of other professionals from completely different backgrounds and even with his; forgetting to add though those of the horde of advisers whom he needs from given his low qualifications, as well as his important privileged political extra-earnings, these really coming from a public treasury that is hardly fed by the citizens he constantly tries to manipulate.

Furthermore, this media circus compares with the proposal of AENA for the new working agreement to contain the implementation of mandatory overtime to meet the shortage of air traffic controllers. A point that, in light of the present conflict has been received unwillingly by all of us, especially by those who do not do it. In this way, AENA contradicts itself proposing to convert the problem into its solution.

It is also striking, that AENA has asked us in the past for help so they could inaugurate very expensive infrastructures as well as the implementation of new airspace sectors designed in a hurry. All this happening in a narrow period of time enforced by the minister in turn and usually in the run-up to general, regional or local elections. Without sparing any expense or worrying as to whether they were going to exceed the maximum overtime legally allowed and after congratulating us on our effort, we are now publicly reproached that our salary, which has been agreed freely together with our union representatives, is too high compared to the one of our neighbouring countries. They are ignoring though the working conditions of their air traffic controllers and also basing all data on inconsistent statistics, like those provided by EUROCONTROL, IATA and AENA itself, which are very contradictory among them.

But AENA did not need to give in the leadership of the negotiation to the Minister of Public Works. They only had to recruit new air traffic controllers, what has not happened since 2006. Since then, important infrastructures have been opened up and part of the Spanish airspace has been reorganized and on the whole, increasing the need for staff. And if AENA has not taken on the air traffic controllers they knew they were going to be needed to cover retirement, early retirement, premature deaths and other needs as a result of all the above mentioned causes, it has been because in reality it was cheaper to pay overtime than to recruit, train and contract new air traffic controllers. Hence, AENA would reduce its fixed costs before it was time to propose drastic cuts over the negotiation of a new working agreement that has been intentionally and unjustifiably delayed for more than five years.

The minister, along with AENA, has also taken advantage of this opportunity to launch with a great fanfare a project to replace air traffic control service (ATC) at several airports, including some newly-opened ones, by an Aerodrome Flight Information Service (AFIS). But what they do not say, is that its implementation will surely lead to an increase of air traffic controllers' workload based at the ATC units close to those airports, where the staff will have to be strengthened under penalty of having to establish regulations of air traffic in order to avoid exceeding sector capacity that would generate significant delays in the air transport system. And that in the end, many commercial flights will cease to operate to them, a situation that will represent a considerable decline in the economic activity in their geographical area of influence and, in many cases, a record of failed investment justified more by political reasons than by the hackneyed "general interest".

The coming months are going to be tough for everyone because the problem has only started. Without a new working agreement or overtime allowed, the shortage of air traffic controllers, often drawn from our leisure time and dedication to our families, will be further noticed over Easter. So the Spanish air traffic controllers will have to endure yet again the weight of another suspected "covered-up" strike. But it will not be so, as it has never happened before.

When despite increasing our productivity it is inevitable to recruit more air traffic controllers, and the AFIS implementation fails to reduce the air navigation taxes significantly, the general public will then realize, perhaps too late, that they have been deceived. And although quite possibly our average salary will be constrained, it is also true that the air traffic controllers wage sum will remain virtually unchanged. And so will the air navigation taxes.

The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association of Spain (APCAE) would like to reiterate to the media and to all air transport users, that if in the coming months a similar situation to that experienced over Christmas takes place, it will not be as a result of us practicing any kind of working pressure, but as a consequence of the inability of the minister of Public Works and AENA managers to adequately deal with the negotiating process. If this happens, the only choice will be to look towards the window of Mr. Jose Blanco's office to demand his resignation.

And while this is happening, Spanish air traffic controllers will be very busy providing a safely, orderly, and expeditious flow to the air traffic, facilitating a smooth air travel to millions of passengers and contributing to the economic growth of our country.

Madrid, January 31th, 2010

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