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Press Release

To,
The Editor,

Sir,

Airline Fatigue Crisis and Indigo Controversy: The Lessons Indian Railways Must Not Ignore

1).Chaos in Airways.

Over the past few days, the crisis involving Indigo's fatigue-hit crew, has captured national attention. : India's aviation safety framework is struggling to enforce its own fatigue-risk regulations in the face of resistance from a powerful private airline.

After years of hesitation, the Indian government finally adopted the Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS) in 2023 and notified revised Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) to come into effect from November 2025. These rules were meant to be an international-standard response to crew fatigue, which is now recognized as a major safety risk across global aviation.

Despite having two full years to prepare, Indigo did almost nothing to restructure its crew scheduling duly increasing manpower. The "DGCA (Directorate General of Civil Aviation in India)— already stretched thin with inadequate staff — could not ensure compliance or push the preparation. When the deadline approached, Indigo resorted to arm-twisting, and ultimately the government postponed a regulation intended purely for safety. Indigo management did not advise the flight cancellation or rescheduling to the passengers and allowed the passengers to check in

right time. Thus entire air ports in India went into a chaos as the mass of passengers went beyond the holding capacities of the ports. Really the

Indigo- the monopoly company in civil aviation, put the miseries of the people into ransom, to get the implementation of FDTL postponed again. Thus safety of the passengers left to divine powers again. Not only that, the flight operators squeezed the distressed passengers charging very high rates of 20 times and more!

This episode raises a critical question that whether safety-related labour reforms can survive when powerful corporations resist them?

2).Indigo Episode-A Mirror for Indian Railways: The Loco pilot Fatigue Crisis.

The aviation controversy closely mirrors the long-standing issues faced by Loco pilots in Indian Railways. For decades, railway crew have been demanding a scientifically-designed working atmosphere including:

- A maximum of two continuous night duties.
- Rational duty hours aligned with human physiology,
- Proper and adequate rest after every duty and weekly rest,
- Roster planning based on sleep-science and circadian rhythms etc.

Railway safety is more deeply intertwined with human alertness because the technical updating in Railways is inferior to airways.. Being the entire railway system is government owned, all regulatory power lies within the Railway Board — the very same authority responsible for operations.

Many high-level committees — from the Anil Kakodkar Safety Review Committee 2012, to parliamentary panels Tripaty committee(HPC 2013) — have repeatedly recommended scientific working hour regulations for Loco pilots. Yet the Railway Board has refused to implement them, citing operational constraints.

The attitude of Railway administration to this pertinent issue shall only be termed as “most worst”. Loco running staff of Indian Railways demanding 6hours’ duty from 1948. They went into a strike in August 1973 and entered into an agreement for an upper limit of 10 hours. But still it is a dream.

The preliminary enquiry Report submitted by CRS vide letter No. T.12019/50/SEC/23-24/405 dated 04/07/2023 on the collision of two trains at Singpur station near Bilaspur on 19/04/2023, showcase the apathy of

Railway management. Paras 6.11 of that report reads as under.

6.11. Working hours of the crew of the trains involved in the accident at the time of accident.

6.11.1. Train No N/NPSB: LP had signed ON at 16.20 hours on 18/04/23 at BSP; ALP signed at 15.45 hrs. on 18/04/23 at BSP. **The crew was on duty for more than 14 hours.** Both the LP and ALP **had availed a PR of hours** before the trip, on 17/04/23.(emphasis added)

6.11.2 Train No BOBRN/BRS: LP had signed at 2.51 hours on 19/04/23 at BJRI; ALP had signed at 2.45 hrs. on 19/04/23 at BJRI. The crew was thus on duty for about four hours.

6.11.3. Train No N/ PSSS: Leading Loco: LP had signed at 11.00 hours on 18/04/23 at KGS; ALP had signed at 10.30 hours on 18/04/23 at KGS. **The crew was thus on duty for more than 19/20 hours. The LP/ ALP in the rear loco of the train had also completed 22/23 hours**(emphasis added). This depicts the real working condition of Loco Pilots in Railways, while a rule of maximum limit of 12 hours is ordered in 2016.

The 172 year old Railways have never ventured to conduct the job analysis on the duty of its Loco Pilots. In the judgement pronounced on 26/04/2022, by High Court of Chennai in writ petition No 23389 of 2013 we can see the submission of the Railway management that they did never conduct a job analysis of Loco Pilots. The High Court ordered Deputy Chief Labour Commissioner (Central) Chennai to conduct job analysis within 6 weeks from 26/04/22. Railway administration refused permission to labour department claiming Railways alone have the competency to conduct job analysis and Railway management refuse to do that also.

The weekly rest of Loco Running staff is termed as PR (Periodical rest) and thus the eligibility of such rests is reduced to 48 in a year instead of 52, that too of 30 hours inclusive of the daily rest of 16 hours. The unlawful curtailment of daily rest was prohibited by High Court of Karnataka in 2010, but to no avail.

Just like in aviation, “safety is being compromised because labour reforms are seen as a burden, not a necessity.”

3).Government’s Dilemma: Strict With Workers, Lenient With Corporates.

The contrast is striking:

Every agitation of workers in any public sector or government-run industry are often met with disciplinary action, charge sheets, or suppression invoking all sorts of black rules and are being justified as taken for the convenience of the travelling people or transportation of essential goods.

But when large private corporations resist safety regulations, the government kneels down before their dictums even neglecting the safety of the system!

4).International Experience: Fatigue Science cannot be compromised.

Globally, fatigue-risk rules have emerged from decades of research and safety failures: For example, The “European Union Railways” follow strict cumulative duty and rest limits. “American railroads” operate under the Hours of Service Act with mandatory off-duty rest. Airlines worldwide have adopted ICAO-based FRMS frameworks. Countries like Australia and Canada use advanced bio mathematical models to design crew duty schedules.

The foundational principles of fatigue – risk rule are-

- 1) Fatigue kills people.
- 2) Fatigue risks cannot be negotiated.
- 3) Fatigue-science rules must be enforced — strictly and consistently.

5).What Indian Railways Needs Now: FRMS-Based Rules With Strict Implementation?

1. Immediate adoption of an FRMS-based working hour system for Loco pilots with 6 hours daily limit.
2. Circadian-science based crew rosters.
3. Limiting Continuous Night-duties to two.
4. Predictable rest periods with 16 hours after every duty and weekly rest in addition to daily rest.
5. Fatigue-risk modelling in crew scheduling
6. Filling up of vacancies- now at the highest ever proportions up to 30%
7. Timely creation of posts
8. More importantly, Strict internal implementation of the above, through statutory rules.
9. Transparent monitoring and accountability of implementation at all levels of management.

6).Safety dilution under new labour codes.

Hours-of-work protections must not be weakened under new labour codes that permits 12 hour duty a day. Instead, transport workers like Loco pilots — whose alertness directly affects public safety — require “enhanced” protections.

7).Conclusion: Safety Cannot Be Postponed

The Indigo controversy is not just an aviation issue; it is a warning for all high-risk industries.

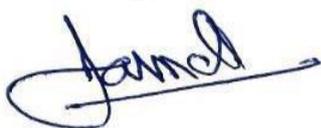
Whether in the skies or on the rails, worker fatigue directly translates into dangers to passenger safety. Regulations based on modern sleep science are not mere “union demands” to skip from duty. But, they are demands of “safety standards”. The history of this union is the story of such agitations and the brutal suppressions the workers underwent.

Unlawful non implementation of mandatory safety measures in aviation has already triggered a national debate. Selling of government owned AIR India to TATAs is also being criticised for being the reason for uncontrolled rise in air ticket fares during the crisis.

The present aviation crisis should become an eye opener to Railway management. The lives of millions of passengers depend more on the alertness of Loco pilots, than airlines, because technical advancement in Railways is far inferior to airways.

There is an urgent need to move beyond outdated regulations and adopt a modern FRMS-based framework — not tomorrow, not someday, but “now”.

Thankingyou

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

(K. C. James)
Secretary General,
AILRSA

