

News in Brief

Air transport Airport taxes

● The reduction in airport taxes in the Canaries, Balearics and Ceuta and Melilla which brought such a welcome boost in new flights to a badly flagging tourist industry is unlikely to be continued following a recent EU ruling.

The EU Justice Tribunal ruled that Spain violated the EU regulations in applying different airport taxes to specific areas within the country.

The European Commission denounced Spain to the Luxembourg Tribunal, claiming that the Spanish law allowing certain grants and exemptions in airport taxes is contrary to the Community principal of equal services offer within the area of maritime transport. The Tribunal considers that the airport taxes reduction gives, "an unjustified advantage in comparison to travel to other points of the EU and elsewhere".

It is a blow for everyone who lives and works in the islands as tourism will inevitably be negatively affected by the decision, and no doubt those involved in selling the islands as a destination will look to see how this affects airlines who have recently announced an increase in flights to the Canaries specifically due to the reduced taxes.

Only recently Ryanair's Michael Cawley said, "we commend the local government's decision to protect its vital tourism industry, jobs and the Canary Island economy with the extension of the hugely successful airport charges discount scheme. We are confident that in the current climate of reduced traffic and tourism in Spain the Spanish Government will see the wisdom of extending low airport costs throughout Spain."



AIR TRANSPORT

Strike threats

Spain needs 1,200 more air traffic controllers to be able to move the number of planes that are currently using its airspace.

Just in the Canaries another 120 professionals are badly needed according to a representative of workers in the sector during a meeting with the Canarian president, Paulino Rivero. The union representative for the air traffic controllers (USCA), Miguel Torrens, insisted that the Spanish airports authority, AENA, "couldn't care less about the delays that occurred in the Canaries over Christmas" and warned that if the situation remained unchanged, the same would occur over Easter because, he maintained, that we don't have, "the people to move the number of planes" in the Canaries during peak periods like these.

He denied that there had

been a work to rule over the Christmas holidays and blamed the delays on AENA for poor planning as they were expecting a drop in air traffic of 17 per cent but the actual reduction was only 2.7 per cent. Torrens added that throughout 2009, the Canarian air traffic control service had been operating with 25 per cent fewer personnel than the previous year.

After recent disclosures of huge wages in the press, Torrens affirmed that the Spanish controllers were paid, "more or less the same as any of their European colleagues," but emphasised that because of the lack of personnel they were forced to work extra hours, although he admitted that they were, "well paid".

The regional government's Minister for Transport, Juan Ramón Hernández gave assurances that the Canarian government,

"will not tolerate" a repeat of the events at Christmas and asked that the Spanish Transport Ministry sorted out the situation as soon as possible as what happened over the holidays, "is intolerable" given the importance of air travel to the economy of the islands.

In reply to criticism that the air traffic controllers had damaged the Canarian economy, Torrens affirmed, "we are aware of the harm that we could do to the Islands, we are fighting for that too, we're Canarians as well", however he underlined that what the workers cannot do is work over and above their limits, nor could they go against the limits laid down by international regulations. Representatives of USCA gave an assurance that Easter flights within Spain would not be interrupted by any action of theirs.

The unions only offered

an increase in productivity in exchange for more money and as they already earn an average €334,000 each per year, the Spanish government has decided to act, announcing a new law to "control" the controllers. Under the new law, AENA would regain management of the air traffic control service which is currently managed by the controllers themselves.

The service will be open to be put out to tender and more AFIS (automatic computer controlled services) will be installed in the smaller airports which would need a technician but not a fully qualified air traffic controller.

The Development Minister, José Blanco, has been warning for months what would occur if USCA failed to come to any agreement. For the next three years, strikes and work to rules will be considered a breach of

the law, their working week is to be redefined and the number of overtime hours which can be worked will be reduced to 80 per year as set out in the workers' statute and they will be paid at a normal rate of around €117 per hour instead of the current €240-350. Air traf-

Air traffic controllers are to see their power reduced

fic controllers may now be transferred from one airport to another and if they refuse, the refusal will be considered a serious work offence and may leave the individual open to dismissal.

The announcement made it clear that AENA's costs, "are the highest in Europe" and blamed the increasing costs of the air traffic controllers wages. The result of these, "disproportionate wages" is that Spanish airports charge more than any other European airport, a "ridiculous position" given the country's dependence on tourism as a prime economic motor.

The union immediately announced that they intend to take whatever legal measures are necessary to defend their current position, rejecting the methods of "imposition" devised by the government, but repeated their promise to maintain the necessary services over Easter. However they have agreed to return to the negotiating table where Blanco assured them, "we are always willing to talk, but we have been trying to reach an agreement now for the last five years since the last collective bargaining agreement expired.

We want more efficiency and that the navigation of our air space is more financially competitive," he confirmed.

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