

BUSINESS

Southwest Airlines Pilots Union Sues Boeing, Alleging Lost Compensation

The union alleges the plane maker rushed its 737 MAX jet to market and misrepresented the plane as safe



Southwest Airlines had 34 737 MAX jets in its fleet at the time of their grounding in March. PHOTO: MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS

By Alison Sider

Updated Oct. 7, 2019 6:44 pm ET

The union representing pilots at Southwest Airlines [LUV 0.60% ▲](#) Co. sued Boeing [BA 1.04% ▲](#) Co., alleging that the plane maker rushed its 737 MAX jet to market and misrepresented the plane as safe.

The MAX has been grounded since March in the wake of two plane crashes within a five-month period that killed 346 people. The nearly 10,000 Southwest pilots represented by the union say that they are losing millions of dollars a month as the grounding stretches on.

The pilots said in their suit, filed Monday in a Dallas County, Texas, court that they agreed to fly the MAX based on Boeing's assertions that the jet was essentially the same as the previous model of the 737, which Southwest pilots know well.

“We have to be able to trust Boeing to truthfully disclose the information we need to safely operate our aircraft. In the case of the 737 MAX, that absolutely did not happen,” Jon Weeks, president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association, or Swapa, said in a statement about the lawsuit.

Boeing said it respects Southwest’s pilots and will continue to work with them to return the MAX to service, but will defend itself against the suit.

“While we value our long relationship with SWAPA, we believe this lawsuit is meritless and will vigorously defend against it,” a spokesman said. Previously, Boeing has said the MAX was certified according to accepted industry standards and FAA requirements.

Southwest had 34 MAX jets in its fleet at the time of the grounding and was supposed to have around twice as many by the end of the year. Without those planes, the airline has had to cancel some 30,000 flights, the pilots union said.

Boeing has said it expects the MAX to be approved by regulators to fly again before the end of the year. But Southwest has said it could take another month or longer to get its planes ready to fly and to train pilots. The airline hasn’t scheduled any MAX flights until early January.

Southwest pilots have claimed that this has meant fewer opportunities to fly and earn money, costing them more than \$100 million collectively.

The crashes and Boeing’s subsequent response have strained the company’s relationships with some pilots. Pilots at airlines including Southwest and American Airlines Group Inc. have sharply criticized Boeing for not initially providing enough information about the new flight-control system that has been implicated in both crashes.

The Southwest pilots said they were left in the dark about this system, known as MCAS, despite having had detailed discussions with Boeing about the MAX while it was being developed and participating in training flights and other exercises before it began commercial service.

“Boeing’s misrepresentations caused SWAPA to believe that the 737 MAX aircraft was safe, and that it was to SWAPA pilots’ economic advantage to agree to fly the 737 MAX aircraft for their employer, Southwest Airlines,” the Southwest pilots said in their suit, citing media reports and other public statements about the plane’s development.

Boeing has set aside an initial \$5.6 billion to compensate airline customers for grounded and undelivered jets.

Southwest Chief Executive Gary Kelly has previously said that the carrier is in talks with Boeing on a possible settlement, and said in a message to employees last month that the airline would

look to share any proceeds of a deal with workers.

The Allied Pilots Association, a separate union representing pilots at American Airlines, said in a statement Monday that it believes members deserve compensation from Boeing, but plans to seek it through American rather than directly from the plane maker.

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