

Cathay Pacific to pay \$8 million for firing, defaming pilots

November 12, 2009 - 9:37AM

A Hong Kong court ruled yesterday that carrier Cathay Pacific must pay 18 pilots nearly eight million US dollars for unfairly dismissing and defaming them.

The former employees -- who were among 49 pilots sacked by Cathay after talks broke down with management over their work conditions in 2001 -- argued they were axed after starting a campaign against certain employment rules.

The group, known as the "49ers", were staff union members who had since the 1990s campaigned against what they alleged to be Cathay's practice of making pilots perform duties over and above their contractual obligations.

Pilots were often required to fly longer hours with shorter breaks between duties, they said.

In his written judgment, which ended the eight-year court battle, Judge Anselmo Reyes said that the "predominant reason for the plaintiffs' termination by Cathay was their perceived participation in union activities."

He ruled that the carrier should award 150,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$A20,600) to each of the pilots for unfair dismissal.

Judge Reyes also ordered Cathay to pay all but one of the 18 pilots an additional 3.3 million Hong Kong dollars each, ruling that chief executive Tony Tyler and then chief operating officer Philip Chen made defamatory and career-damaging statements about them.

The other pilot passed away in 2002.

When Tyler announced the pilots' dismissal in 2001, he suggested they were unprofessional, had poor employment records and did not care about the interests of the airline or Hong Kong, Judge Reyes said.

"Cathay's management were making serious allegations about the professionalism, character and employment of the plaintiffs. Such allegations would obviously have serious repercussions on their careers," the judge said.

A Cathay spokesman said the airline had not yet decided whether to appeal against the rulings.

"We are disappointed with some aspects of the judgement. We are now carefully studying the 70-page High Court judgement with our legal counsel before deciding on any further steps we may take," the spokesman said.

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