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A bitter falling-out in the skies

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A senior Cathay Pacific captain suspects his wife, an air stewardess, is having an affair with another of the airline's pilots. To make matters worse, the lover is a young upstart whom the senior pilot believes is out to wreck his career as well as his marriage.

He confronts his wife. She not only admits the relationship but tells him it is his fault and taunts him over his masculinity. Enraged, the captain declares that their marriage is over and he wants nothing more to do with her.

It sounds like the plot for the kind of steamy novel holidaymakers might pick up on their way through Chek Lap Kok airport to read on the beach. In fact, it is the personification of a real-life rift between the two key unions in the Hong Kong airline industry.

The senior pilot is the 900-member Aircrew Officers Association (AOA). The wife is the 4,000-member Flight Attendants Union (FAU). And the young lover who split the marriage is the newly formed breakaway Cathay Pilots Union (CPU), which has only a handful of members and none prepared to give their names.

Like most affairs, it didn't just happen overnight. The AOA and the FAU had been drifting apart for some time before the third party came along - and a look at their recent history suggests irreconcilable differences may lie at the root of the deteriorating relations.

Simmering differences exploded into the open in spectacular fashion last month when FAU chairman Becky Kwan Siu-wa accused the AOA of abandoning the sacked Cathay pilots known as the 49ers and allegedly told AOA general secretary John Findlay: "Your members are selfish and ball-less".

Outraged, AOA president Murray Gardner responded by cutting off all forms of co-operation with the FAU and told Ms Kwan in a letter: "You are very close to destroying all trust in the FAU by this association."

Reflecting on what appears to be a permanent rift in once very close relations between the two unions, Ms Kwan said: "In the past, it was as if the FAU was married to the AOA. Now I feel we are going in opposite directions. It is very sad."

Mr Findlay remarked: "I find it inconceivable that we will have any form of relationship with them so long as they are supporting this breakaway union."

So what happened to drive a wedge between the two unions, who have not only stood shoulder to shoulder in successive industrial disputes in the 1990s - first involving the flight attendants and later involving the pilots - but ironically whose members are in many cases either married or romantically involved with each other?

The answer appears to lie in two significant but very different victories for the two unions which characterise the diverse paths they have set out upon.

The AOA under the presidency of Mr Gardner has mended fences with Cathay, succeeding in April in a key battle to persuade members to accept a company offer to settle the long-running dispute over the sacking of the 49ers.

That settlement involved job interviews or 10-month payouts for the sacked pilots in return for the union stopping all funding for their legal actions. Twenty-one have since accepted interviews; 11 have gone for payouts. Many of the others are expected to fight on either alone or with the support of the breakaway union.

The FAU has at the same time seen its relations with Cathay grow frostier after it won a crushing High Court victory against the airline for unilaterally scrapping annual pay increments seven years ago, costing Cathay \$280 million in back pay and salary increases.

Rightly or wrongly, the FAU believes the AOA was the first to break faith by "climbing into bed" with Cathay management over the 49ers offer. It was only after that happened that the FAU decided to seek out a new relationship with the breakaway union.

Speaking with the air of an overachieving wife whose fogeyish husband refuses to acknowledge her success, Ms Kwan said: "After our High Court victory, my phone was jam-packed with congratulatory messages for three days. But I got nothing from the AOA.

"It shows that the leadership of the union is not on the same wavelength as the FAU or the rest of the labour community in Hong Kong. Pilots were sending us e-mails congratulating us, and some of them wrote to the AOA saying, 'please publish these e-mails in our newsletter to congratulate the FAU on its success' - but nothing appeared."

Mr Findlay played down the significance of the lack of an official AOA message of congratulations. "I had a conversation with her [Ms Kwan] and I congratulated her over the telephone. It is not a big deal," he said. "When we won the Gardner case [a landmark High Court victory over rosters won by Murray Gardner in 2003], the FAU didn't write to us and say congratulations, but they did phone up and say 'well done'."

The real meltdown in relations came when the FAU supported the setting up of the Cathay Pilots Union, providing it with a temporary banking facility and later inviting one of its founders to speak at the FAU's annual general meeting at the end of May.

When Mr Findlay phoned Ms Kwan to ask why the FAU was supporting the breakaway union, he says she told him: "If the AOA won't help the 49ers, the FAU can and will." Mr Gardner then wrote to Ms Kwan: "I find your remarks offensive and impertinent. For almost four years this association has provided assistance to the 49ers without precedent in our industry ... This association and its members can be very proud of what we achieved."

The FAU leader is unrepentant. Contrasting the case of the 49ers with the FAU's own High Court victory, she said: "What is important is that we persevered and they didn't.

"The 49ers have sacrificed their jobs for the union because they followed union directives and now the union has voted to abandon them and that is very, very sad. These pilots have been abandoned by their union, who they have been sacked for, and for the union leadership to come out and write such an arrogant letter to the FAU - I find that quite difficult to swallow."

While she denies using the exact words "selfish and balls-less" in her conversation with Mr Findlay, it is clear that the labels reflect her views of the AOA leadership. "They are selfish because they didn't want to continue to support the legal battle for the 49ers," she said.

"The leadership kept on telling the members how expensive it was. They didn't tell people or educate members in the principle of standing up for their rights. It seems to me that they have forgotten why these people lost their jobs."

It is an accusation that the AOA finds not only offensive but erroneous, and ignorant of the way in which the offer was debated amid much soul-searching by the union leadership and its members.

"This association has not abandoned the 49ers," Mr Gardner wrote in his letter. "We have in fact, through our persistence and application of sound strategies, succeeded in providing them opportunities that few thought possible so long after their terminations.

"If individual 49ers choose not to accept those opportunities, against the advice of the association and of their own legal counsel, they are free to do so, but that most certainly would not constitute abandonment by the AOA."

In many ways, union officials believe, it was the braver course. Union leaders put up with months of abuse and accusations from the "no" faction before securing a deal that may ultimately save the union from being destroyed by sky-high dues and falling membership.

Ms Kwan, they believe, has acted without the knowledge of most of her own members by siding with the breakaway union, and many will be shocked to realise the AOA has been cast aside and replaced by what can most generously be described as a minority faction.

Nevertheless, the break-up between the AOA and the FAU appears beyond mediation. There is no longer even any dialogue, Mr Findlay said, saying that the FAU "hasn't had the courtesy to reply to Captain Gardner's letter".

Ms Kwan replied: "I don't want to write anything I might regret later. I sometimes think a more well-thought-out response is better. But in the meantime my message to them is MYOB - mind your own business.

"If there was to be any sort of reconciliation, we would need to have some common goal. At the moment I don't see a reason why we should continue to work together."



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