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Sacked Cathay pilots set for public hearing

SIMON PARRY

A group of pilots sacked en masse by Cathay Pacific five years ago to this day are preparing for the first public hearing into the circumstances surrounding their dismissal.

Two more High Court actions have also been lodged in Hong Kong ahead of the anniversary of the sacking of the pilots, known as the "49ers", on July 9, 2001, during a dispute over pay and rosters.

Cathay said yesterday it would vigorously oppose the action.

On July 25 and 26, an industrial tribunal on the outskirts of London will hear the case of Britain-based pilot George Crofts, who was among those sacked by Cathay.

The case, which went ahead only after the House of Lords upheld Mr Crofts' right to a tribunal in the face of Cathay's objections, represents the first public hearing to proceed beyond legal argument after pilots in Australia and the United States stalled their actions.

Some of the remaining 18 sacked pilots who have refused to settle with Cathay over their dismissals are expected to testify in the two-day hearing into the case of Mr Crofts, who was employed by Cathay's British subsidiary Veta.

Meanwhile, six more pilots - three based in Britain and three in the US - have filed writs for breach of contract and defamation against Cathay in Hong Kong courts ahead of today's anniversary.

The two writs are expected to be consolidated with another filed on behalf of 11 sacked pilots seeking compensation or reinstatement for their alleged unfair dismissal.

Fifty-one pilots were sacked by Cathay Pacific to break a work-to-rule during the 2001 dispute, but they became known collectively as the 49ers because 49 were sacked on one day. One of the pilots has since died.

The Aircrew Officers Association last year stopped funding legal action for the 49ers and recommended they accept settlement offers of payouts or job interviews from Cathay. A breakaway group of 18 sacked pilots refused to accept the settlement and have been funded partly by the newly formed Cathay Pilots Union, created chiefly to continue their legal actions.

One of the 49ers pursuing his legal action in Hong Kong, Quentin Heron, 50, said: "The motivation behind this is justice and fairness and what is right. I believe I am going to be held to be right by the law.

"This isn't just important for us. It is important for Hong Kong. It goes to the issue of what a contract is worth in Hong Kong."

A Cathay spokeswoman said: "These plaintiffs' employment contracts were terminated in July 2001. Along with some others, they took legal action against the company in the USA, but this action failed.

"They have neither rejoined the company nor accepted its financial settlement offer ... We cannot comment any further at this time."



[Back](#)

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