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Sacked pilots win back Cathay jobs after 4-year break

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Cathay Pacific has given jobs back to nearly one in four of the pilots it sacked in a bitter dispute over pay and rosters in 2001 following the success of a controversial peace deal between the airline and the pilots' union.

Twelve of the group known as the "49ers" - six former captains and six former first officers - successfully applied for jobs as freighter pilots with Cathay and will restart their careers with the airline in October after a break of more than four years.

Seven other sacked pilots were interviewed but rejected as unsuitable. The process included psychological evaluations because of the acrimonious industrial dispute and the length of time some had been away from the cockpit.

The failed applicants, along with 13 other pilots who chose not to reapply for jobs, have accepted settlements of 10 months' pay in return for dropping all legal action over their sackings.

Eighteen other sacked pilots have rejected the peace deal recommended to them by the Aircrew Officers Association (AOA) and are continuing with legal action in the Hong Kong courts against Cathay for alleged unfair dismissal.

AOA members voted to drop all financial and legal assistance to the 49ers in return for the offer of job interviews or payouts from Cathay.

A breakaway union, the Cathay Pilots Union, has been formed to continue to raise funds for the legal battles of the pilots who turned down the deal.

Fifty-one pilots were sacked en masse 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.

AOA general-secretary John Findlay, who helped organise preparation sessions for the five-hour interviews and psychological testing, said: "We are very pleased that 12 of the 49ers will soon be flying again with Cathay Pacific.

"Naturally, there is a degree of disappointment that not all those interviewed were successful. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that 12 careers have now been recovered and 20 others will receive a cash settlement."

The interview and assessment process was agreed in advance by the union and Cathay. Mr Findlay said: "We are satisfied that the process was carried out in a totally fair and impartial manner."

Director of Flight Operations Nick Rhodes said in a memo to Cathay staff that the successful interviewees would rejoin Cathay on the freighter fleets based in Europe and North America.

Mr Rhodes said it was regrettable not all applicants were successful but he was "entirely comfortable that the process was robust and the team remained objective throughout".

Reacting to the recruitment news, a senior pilot who is a member of the Cathay Pilots Union said: "The fact that 35 per cent of the applicants were rejected shows why only four of the 49ers wanted to accept the offer in the first place - it was not a fair and transparent system.

"The only 49ers who may yet obtain fair justice are the 18 who seek a legal settlement. Even then, they will not recover their careers or recoup lost money, but they will be able to clear their names from the stigma placed on them by Cathay management."



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