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WP4 (Taiwan) Civil Society Engagement Report

Focus Group Interview with Pilots, December 14, 2024

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Civil Society Engagement Report: Focus Group Interview with Pilots, December 14, 2024

As part of our Civil Society Engagement, the WP4 Taiwan team conducted three focus groups to understand the experiences of social groups that had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic governance in Taiwan: frontline health professionals, pilots, and people who underwent quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. These focus groups, along with desk research, enable the team to gain a more complete understanding of the issues.

Although Taiwan quickly closed its borders in March 2020, the demand for international cargo flights continued to grow. Under Taiwan's strict border control measures, pilots played a pivotal role in sustaining the Island's economy and ensuring the import of essential goods. Nevertheless, they faced immense social pressure, deteriorating working conditions, and prolonged isolation.

In October 2024, the WP4 Taiwan team held a workshop on various legal controversies during COVID-19. The [Air Line Pilots Association](#) (ALPA-T) was invited to this workshop but was unable to attend because it was undertaking legal action in the administrative court and a judge from that court was amongst the participants. The WP4 Taiwan team met with the ALPA-T separately as an addition to this workshop to understand the rationale behind their collective action (see First Workshop on HRJust: COVID-19 Governance in Taiwan, p. 2). Through this focus group interview, we gained deeper insights into how the pandemic policy overburdened pilots, and the stigmatization they faced.

During the pandemic, the ALPA-T took action to support its members. For instance, to challenge what it considered to be the inadequate procedural protection provided by and the legal interpretation of the quarantine mandate, the ALPA-T organized its members to file habeas corpus petitions whenever they received a quarantine notice upon returning from flight duty.



The ALPA-T organized a demonstration to protest unreasonable quarantine periods, forced consecutive flight assignments, and restricted access to medical care. (October 28, 2021)

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The protesters urged the government to replace quarantine measures with rapid testing, allowing pilots to return to normal life. By October 2021, most flight crew members had received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, while the first-dose vaccination coverage for the general population had reached 70%

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This is the report of the focus group with pilots and was held on December 14, 2024. It focused on pilots who were repeatedly quarantined due to their occupation. We recruited 4 participants through the ALPA-T.

Government by Proxy: Pressuring Airlines to Regulate Pilots

As civil aviation is a highly regulated industry, airlines operate under strict government oversight. The Civil Aeronautics Administration, under pressure from the Central Epidemic Commanding Center (CECC), regularly urged airlines to ensure that no flight crew members violated COVID regulations. In response,

airlines adopted internal policies that were even stricter than government mandates, further restricting pilots' rights and freedoms. This included introducing a "health self-monitoring" period, where there continued to be restrictions including prohibitions on social gatherings even after an individual had completed quarantine.

Airline staff who violated COVID regulations, even for minor infractions, faced harsh internal sanctions, including demotions. In one case, a previously state-owned airline dismissed a pilot for visiting a sports bar during the "health self-monitoring" period. The pilot later tested positive for COVID-19, and the CECC disclosed his movement while he was infectious, triggering public outrage against the pilot. Under government pressure, the airline made an example of him. This case exemplifies the so-called "Flucht in das Privatrecht" (escape into private law), where the administration indirectly restricts individuals' freedoms by controlling private actors and outsourcing enforcement to the private sectors. This strategy allows governmental power to evade legal scrutiny and judicial oversight.

Stigmatized yet Indispensable

CECC's practice of disclosing the pilot's footprints also stigmatized pilots as a social group. While people continued to enjoy domestic tourism and social gatherings, pilots were labeled as higher-risk for contracting COVID-19 and were socially isolated. Pilots who tested positive for COVID-19 were often assumed to have violated pandemic regulations, worsening the stigma.

Due to manpower shortages and the high demand for cargo flights, airlines were permitted to assign pilots to fly even during their quarantine period. Later in the pandemic, similar concerns led the government to shorten the mandatory quarantine period for pilots. Both the airline practices and the government policy fueled public perception that pilots were simultaneously both a privileged group and potential "weak links" in Taiwan's zero-COVID strategy.

Deteriorating Working Conditions

The pandemic significantly worsened pilots' working conditions. Due to Taiwan's strict quarantine mandates, pilots found themselves trapped in an endless cycle of flight duty and quarantine. Even when they accepted two or three

consecutive flight assignments to minimize the mandatory quarantine period—allowing them to be quarantined once after multiple flights instead of after each one—, they remained under the “health self-monitoring” period during their days off and were subjected to various restrictions.

To maximize air freight capacity, airlines assigned pilots to consecutive flights. Those who refused these assignments faced punitive arrangements, such as reduced flight time—leading to lower pay or, in some cases, falling short of the minimum flight hours required to maintain their qualifications.

Restricted Medical Access

During quarantine, pilots were unable to receive adequate medical care. Until the spring of 2022, individuals who returned from abroad were only allowed to visit hospitals after completing a 14-day quarantine. Although the quarantine period was shortened for pilots due to various concerns, they were still barred from seeing a doctor until they had spent 14 days in Taiwan. At our October workshop, one case was reported in which a pilot accidentally broke his leg while on duty. Due to quarantine restrictions, a doctor examined him from a distance outside the hospital without performing an X-ray. He was given a cast and prescribed only painkillers, with no further medical assessment until after the 14-day period. In another case, the repeated fly-quarantine cycle prevented a pilot from making his regular hospital visits. To accumulate the required 14 days in Taiwan before seeing his doctor, he first had to endure the grueling schedule of three consecutive flights per month, combining his monthly off-days, and use his annual leave.

Until May 2022, the CECC had marked the occupation of flight crew members on the smart chip of their National Health Insurance (NHI) cards to remind medical providers to take extra precautions. Although medical providers were not supposed to deny care to any inbound travelers who had spent 14 days in Taiwan, widespread stigma led to pilots and crew members being turned away after checking in with their NHI cards, even though this was not a correct interpretation of the requirements

Police Surveillance and Excessive Monitoring of Pilots

Since the quarantine enforcement was often carried out by the police, it

appears that pilots under quarantine were subjected to excessive monitoring. During our desk research, we found news reports indicating that the quarantine list had been linked to the mobile police system, a hand-held device used by the police.

It remained unclear whether the police actively searched for violators using this data or if the system was only triggered when a quarantine violation was reported. However, insights from our workshop in October 2024 and this focus group in December 2024 suggest that active surveillance was likely. In one case, when a pilot was quarantined after a flight duty, his wife was pulled over by the police simply because the car was registered under his name. In another case, a pilot who had just completed quarantine was stopped because his data had not yet been updated. Since neither case involved a reported violation, it is likely the quarantine list — connected to the vehicle registration — was routinely monitored by the police.

Pandemic Policies and Their Impacts on Pilots Need to Be Reassessed

Of the 4 participants in this Focus Group, every one stated that if another pandemic were to occur, they would choose to retire or resign “to save their own lives.” Given pilots’ essential role in sustaining the country’s economy during the COVID pandemic, their experiences highlight the urgent need to reassess the excessive pandemic measures imposed on them. Pilots do not typically fall under the protection of a specific human rights instrument. However, under Taiwan’s COVID-19 policies, they experienced deteriorating working conditions that they viewed as amounting to forced labor, as well as stigmatization and violations of their privacy. Yet, these infringements were largely overlooked by policy makers and society at large and there was little public sympathy for their suffering.