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Russian Airline Aeroflot Suspends Unvaccinated Pilots

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Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency

Russia's flagship airline Aeroflot has suspended several pilots for refusing to vaccinate against the coronavirus, the RBC news website reported Monday, citing a company spokesperson.

At least six unvaccinated pilots were at various times sent on unpaid leave or vacation without pay, Aeroflot spokesman Mikhail Demin told the outlet.

Related article: As Coronavirus Fatalities Hit a Record High, Russia's Vaccination Campaign Falters

The pilots' labor union complained to Aeroflot CEO Mikhail Poluboyarinov of discrimination, arguing that unvaccinated flight attendants and technical support staff do not face similar dismissals.

“No other Russian airline has similar suspensions,” Igor Deldyuzhov, president of the Sheremetyevo Cockpit Personnel Association (SCPA), said in a letter on the union’s website.

“These measures toward employees provoke excessive social tensions and push them to quit,” Deldyuzhov wrote, urging Poluboyarinov to lift the order to dismiss unvaccinated pilots.

He argued that Aeroflot, which employs 2,300 pilots, should not adopt punitive measures against unvaccinated employees given that the airline reached an 84% vaccination rate among its overall staff.

Russia has grappled with slower-than-hoped vaccination rates despite having three authorized and widely available vaccines.

Russia’s labor minister warned this summer that unvaccinated workers risk being sent on unpaid leave. He noted, however, that Russia’s labor code does not prescribe firings for refusing vaccination.

As the highly transmissible Delta variant swept across the country in June, Moscow announced a series of unprecedented steps to boost vaccination rates, including forcing service sector businesses to ensure 60% of their staff had been vaccinated, under threat of fines or shutdowns if they failed to hit the target.

The Kremlin has maintained that Russia’s vaccination campaign is purely voluntary, but urged vaccine-hesitant workers in professions where vaccines are mandatory to change jobs.

Other regions followed Moscow’s lead, rolling out their own mandatory vaccination rules, leading to soaring vaccination rates that have tailed off in recent weeks.

Although free jabs have been available to Russians since December, just 39 million out of a population of some 146 million have been fully vaccinated and 46 million received at least one dose.

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