

No training for pilots on new automated system

Boeing, FAA, pilots unions complicit in rushing doomed jets into service

By Trévon Austin
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Evidence mounts pointing to similarities in the two recent crashes of Boeing 737 Max 8 commercial jets, costing a combined total of 346 lives. It is becoming increasingly clear that the new model 737s were rushed into service without the level of pilot training that normally accompanies the introduction of new or redesigned aircraft. New revelations also indicate that Boeing, the commercial carriers, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the pilots unions were all involved in the process by which safety and training corners were cut in the interests of reducing costs and accelerating production and sales, so as to gain market share and profits at the expense of Boeing's chief competitor, European-based Airbus.

On March 10, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashed about six minutes after takeoff from the airport in Addis Ababa, killing all 157 passengers and crew aboard. This was only five months after a Lion Air 737 Max 8 crashed minutes after takeoff from the airport in Jakarta, Indonesia, killing all 189 passengers and crew. In both cases the pilots struggled to keep the nose of the plane from pointing down, and the jets oscillated wildly between ascent and descent, ultimately plunging to their destruction.

While the investigation into the Lion Air crash is continuing, and the probe of the Ethiopian crash is in only its initial stages, the black boxes having been recovered but not yet read, aviation experts believe that the first crash was connected to a newly installed automated anti-stall system of which the pilots were unaware and which they were unable to manually override. And satellite data, communications from the cockpit and physical evidence found at the crash site of last week's disaster all suggest that in this case as well,

the new automated system, the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System, or MCAS, was a factor.

The *New York Times* reported on Sunday that Boeing, with the support of the FAA, insisted that pilots who previously flew 737s did not require retraining, using expensive and time-consuming simulation cockpits, to safely fly the new, more fuel- and cost-efficient Max models. These planes quickly became the manufacturer's best-selling jets, with more than 4,600 on order around the world and more than 70 in service at Southwest, American and United Airlines in the US. They have played a huge role in record profits and a dizzying run-up in the price of Boeing stock since the introduction of the planes in 2017.

No one can seriously doubt that these were the main considerations that led Boeing, the FAA and the Trump administration to keep the planes flying for days after virtually every other country had grounded them and/or banned them from their air space following the March 10 crash. It was only after Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg reversed his position that the planes were perfectly safe and should keep flying, calling Trump Wednesday morning to recommend their grounding, that Trump announced that afternoon the grounding of the 737 Max fleet in the US pending the results of the crash investigations.

Since then Boeing has suspended deliveries of the jets to customers, while continuing production at the previous, rapid pace.

In its front-page article Sunday, the *Times* quoted Greg Bowen, the training and standards chair at the Southwest pilots union, as saying the "senior leadership" at Southwest told him the engineering data

necessary to design software for pilot training simulators was still being finalized “right up until the plane was nearly completed.”

“They were building the airplane and still designing it,” Bowen said. “The data to build a simulator didn’t become available until about when the plane was ready to fly.”

Despite this extraordinary situation, pilots union officials at American and Southwest met with Boeing and agreed that the plane could be flown without any but the most minimal and cursory additional training. The FAA agreed and declared the new aircraft to be safe.

Boeing said in a statement that “the 737 Max was certified in accordance with the identical FAA requirements and processes that have governed certification of all previous new airplanes and derivatives.” The FAA issued a statement declaring, “The FAA’s aircraft certification processes are well established and have consistently produced safe aircraft designs.”

Even after last October’s Lion Air crash, when pilots urged the airlines to deploy cockpit simulators to train pilots in the new systems on the Max 8 and 9, the carriers refused and the FAA refused to mandate any such action. That remains their position even after the March 10 crash in Ethiopia.

When Boeing was set to begin delivering the aircraft in 2017, a group of pilots union officials who have flown the older 737s put together a training manual without even flying the Max or a simulator. James LaRosa, a 737 captain who helped lead the training group, told the *Times* he flew to a Boeing training center in Seattle to learn about the Max.

LaRosa and other pilots created a 13-page handbook on the differences between the Max and earlier models. This was the only addition to a two-hour iPad training course offered by Boeing, and neither mentioned MCAS.

Dennis Tajer, a spokesman for the American Airlines pilots union, told the *Times* that after the Lion Air crash last fall, Boeing told the pilots that it hadn’t mentioned the new anti-stall software (MCAS) because it did not want to “inundate” them with information.

“When you find out that there are systems on it that are wildly different that affect the performance of the aircraft,” Tajer said, “having a simulator is part of a

safety culture. It can be the difference between a safe, recoverable flight and one that makes the newspapers.”

Over the weekend it was reported that a reclaimed piece of the Ethiopian Airlines plane, known as a jackscrew, indicated that the plane’s stabilizers had been pointed upward. At this angle, the stabilizers would have forced the nose of the jet downward, a similar scenario as that involved in the Lion Air crash.

In order to save fuel and reduce costs, Boeing made the Max’s engines larger than those on previous 737s and mounted them further forward on the wings. It was understood that this change in design could potentially result in the plane’s nose tilting upward, producing a stall under certain circumstances. MCAS was programmed to automatically engage so as to counteract that risk.

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