

Last call for guilt-free flying



A global movement of airline workers is campaigning for the aviation industry to become genuinely sustainable, says SIMON BIRCH.

“I love flying and I’ve wanted to be a pilot ever since I was young.” So says George Hibberd, who became an easyJet pilot in 2019.

However, it was whilst flying around the world that Hibberd began his own personal journey of understanding the colossal impact that aviation was having on the environment.

“By 2022, I had grown increasingly anxious about the effect that our industry was having on the planet and, deep down, I knew that my concern for the climate crisis meant being an airline pilot was damaging my mental health,” Hibberd told the Guardian earlier this year.

The result of this inner conflict was that Hibberd quit his dream job and joined Safe Landing, an international group of aviation workers who want the airline industry to do better for the climate.

“Our community brings together people from across the aviation world, from pilots and cabin crew to engineers and airport staff,” says Finlay Asher, who himself left his job as an aeronautical engineer at Rolls-Royce over environmental concerns to help start Safe Landing in 2020.

“We’ve grown from a small group of pilots into a global movement with over 800 members and supporters in over 30 countries,” Asher adds.

“What unites us is a love of flying and a shared belief that the industry can evolve to operate in harmony with nature, while protecting jobs, communities, and the wonder of flight for generations to come.”

As one of the fastest-growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions, flying has the dubious distinction of being – mile for mile – the most damaging way to travel for the climate, something that growing numbers of aviation workers are now finding impossible to ignore.

“Rather than denying this tension, we decided to confront it,” says Asher.

“So, we’ve created a space where aviation workers could speak openly, share expertise, and take an active role in shaping a fair and sustainable transition for our sector,” he



Green Party leader Zack Polanski (left) speaking to George Hibberd from Safe Landing (right) at the Green Party conference in October.

continues, acknowledging the importance of a “just transition” to a more environmentally responsible aviation industry.

But, given the size of the UK’s multibillion-pound aviation industry, which alone supports more than 350,000 jobs, how is Safe Landing going to achieve its aim of getting the airline industry to act more sustainably?

Undeterred, Finlay Asher outlines its ambitious plans, which place airline workers’ assemblies at their core.

“These are democratic forums adapted from proven Citizens’ Assembly models and give aviation professionals a real voice and input into decisions that shape their industry and its environmental impact.”

Speaking to Safe Landing at the Green Party’s October conference, Green Party leader Zack Polanski agrees that airline workers need a voice in the debate about making the airline industry truly sustainable:

“I think it’s absolutely central with anything to do with the just transition and particularly in the aviation industry,” says Polanski.

“We need to make sure that

people who rely on the aviation industry know that they feel safe and secure and that actually they have livelihoods in the future.”

But the key question is whether the goal of zero-carbon flying is ever likely to become a reality?

“There are various new technologies being developed which could enable zero-carbon or, at least, lower-carbon flight, namely electric, hydrogen, and hybrid-electric powered aircraft,” replies Asher.

“However, these aircraft are still being developed and will initially be far smaller and shorter-range than conventional aircraft. They will carry tens, rather than hundreds, of passengers and will fly hundreds, rather than thousands, of kilometres.”

Asher accepts that the aviation industry faces some severe turbulence and will have to undergo radical changes:

“The only way to save both the climate and aviation is to fly “differently”: less frequently, less fast, and less far.”