

Post disinvestment decision, Air India chief meets unions

- Hindustan Times (Delhi)
- 5 Apr 2018
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NEW DELHI: Unions of Air India (AI) met Pradeep Singh Kharola, the chairman and managing director of the national carrier on Wednesday, a week after government moved a step closer to privatising state-run Air India Ltd by releasing details of the proposed divestment.

The airline's multiple unions have expressed concern over the future of employees once the airline is privatised and said that, if needed, they would protest the move.

"We were called by the CMD and a detailed discussion was held. We told them that we are completely against privatisation. He has promised that the concerns raised by us will be discussed with the ministry of civil aviation. There will be regular meetings in coming days and we are planning to come up with a joint memorandum of all the unions listing our demands," said JB Kadyan, secretary general, ACEU (Air Corporation Employees Union). The union represents around 8,000 AI employees, including the cabin crew.

The government plans to sell up to 76% of its stake in the airline, giving the buyer absolute control. The government will retain the rest, and share some of it with employees through stock option plans. The government's condition is that the control of the airline rests with Indian entities and that the brand name Air India be retained. The government will also sell 100% of low-cost international carrier Air India Express Ltd and a 50% stake in Air India SATS Airport Services Pvt. Ltd, an airport ground-handling joint venture.

"The government promised a lot at the time of the merger but those promises were not fulfilled, so how can we trust them this time? We haven't decided on a protest as this will go against us but we have told the CMD that we are against the privatisation. We will wait for the government's direction," said MS Kukarni, general secretary of the Indian Aircraft Technicians Association (IATA),

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another of the airline's unions. His reference is to the ill-fated 2007 merger of Air India and Indian Airlines, both stateowned (the first flew overseas, and the second within India), a union that many hold responsible for the airline's subsequent troubles.

The civil aviation ministry has invited expressions of interest from interested parties by 5 pm on May 14.

The pilots union is yet to decide on the its stand.

Kharola said the airline would keep communication lines with the unions open.

Air India had 11,214 permanent employees as on December 1, 2017. These include 2,056 people on deputation to other companies and agencies. The airline also had 2,913 employees on contract and 2,661 people on deputation from other companies. Among the permanent staff, as many as 4,217 are set to retire in the next five years.