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French Strikes Leave British Holiday Flights in Turmoil

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British travellers hoping for a smooth summer getaway are instead facing record delays and cancellations, as persistent strikes by French air traffic controllers cripple air travel across Europe.

More than one million passengers have seen their holiday plans disrupted after French air traffic control staff staged a three-day walkout in early July. The strikes, which began on July

2, forced airlines to cancel about 4,000 flights and delay over 7,000 more, according to European Union (EU) officials. The chaos has already cost the aviation sector an estimated €100 million (£84 million), underlining the fragility of Europe's travel infrastructure when unions resort to industrial action.

With over 70 per cent of short-haul flights to and from the United Kingdom routed through French airspace, even a limited stoppage can quickly cascade into widespread disruption. Ryanair Chief Executive Officer Michael O'Leary was blunt in his criticism, accusing the European Commission of failing to protect travellers. O'Leary said that as many as 90 per cent of his airline's 718 cancelled flights during the strikes could have operated if the EU had enforced safeguards for overflight routes that cross France without taking off or landing there.

EasyJet, Britain's largest airline, reported that nearly half of its delays this summer are linked directly to these air traffic control issues, a threefold increase compared to last year. The company's Chief Commercial Officer, Sophie Dekkers, told The Times that France simply lacks the staffing and planning capacity to handle the volume of planes in its skies. Dekkers also highlighted that about 20 per cent of European airspace remains closed, mainly near Ukraine, further compounding delays on popular routes to Spain, Italy, Greece, and Croatia.

Eurocontrol, the body overseeing European airspace management, has warned that the continent could see another record summer of delays as traffic surges. A senior European Union official noted that on the busiest days, 37,000 flights operate, straining resources to the limit. They cautioned that this year's disruption may rival or exceed last summer, which was the worst on record.

Airline executives are urging European policymakers to adopt tougher regulations that prevent local strikes from paralysing cross-border travel, a stance that resonates with those who believe vital transport networks should be shielded from repeated industrial disputes. As millions prepare for summer holidays, many are left questioning why Europe's leaders have been slow to act, allowing union walkouts to undermine the freedom of movement that the European Union often champions in principle.