

THE AUSTRALIAN

Qantas 'threat' to pilots spurs progress in talks

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12:00AM FEBRUARY 21, 2020 • 3 COMMENTS

A threat by Qantas to set up a new group of pilots to fly ultra-long-range Project Sunrise flights has had the desired effect, CEO Alan Joyce has suggested.

Last week Qantas informed its pilots it was determined to push ahead with the flights from 2023 and if it could not get agreement on a pay deal by the end of March it would create a new employment entity to operate the services.

Speaking at the airline's half-year results on Thursday, Mr Joyce said the negotiating team headed by former Australian and International Pilots Association president Nathan Safe had reported making more progress in the past week than in the past seven months.

"We are making progress and our No 1, No 2 and No 3 choice is to do a deal with our pilots to get this flying to occur and that's what we're focused on, but this is too critical for us to walk away from and we will be doing it," Mr Joyce said.

In what could be seen as a further prod to pilots, Mr Joyce revealed he had been contacted by an Australian captain with China Southern Airlines keen to step into the void.

"He's been laid off (due to the coronavirus outbreak) and says he can get hundreds of captains from China and Asia to operate Project Sunrise if we want to, and he's volunteered to set up a company to do that for us," Mr Joyce said. "There's no shortage of pilots at the moment."

Although the final decision on the flights lay with the board and the regulator, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority, Mr Joyce said he believed the ultra-long-range services were critical to the future of Qantas.

“We believe it gives us a value proposition that no other airline in the world can offer,” he said. “We’ve seen with Perth-London and the early stages of Brisbane-Chicago that ultra-long-haul flying does work for us given the product and given the focus that we have.”

The sticking points for pilots remain a new “B” pay scale for future second officers and an extension of the maximum operating hours to 23.5.

Sydney Airport CEO Geoff Culbert welcomed Mr Joyce’s determination to proceed with the flights, which would include services to New York and London.