

The airport staff lobby group is now of the belief that workers were 'conned'

Doubts grow that direct flights to New York will really lift Shannon back off the ground

With duty-free shop and bar revenue reportedly down, Jim Dunne found uncertainty about the airport's future

THE last Sunday in March was a red-letter day for Aer Lingus. Its first New York flight took off from Dublin without the obligation to land at Shannon. The direct service is an integral part of the airline's survival plan drawn up by the executive chairman, Mr Bernie Cahill. Aer Lingus is hoping to win back the traffic, especially the high-yield business traveller, that chooses to fly to the United States over London and Manchester.

Shannon fought against allowing the direct flights and appeared to have won a solid success last year when Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn, then the Minister responsible for transport and a west of Ireland TD, announced that Shannon's status would be retained by the Government. Within six months, this decision was reversed by the new Minister for Transport, Energy and Communications, Mr Cowen, who bought the case made by Mr Cahill, that Aer Lingus would have to pull off the Atlantic altogether unless some direct flights from Dublin were permitted.

Announcing the new policy in Shannon last January, Mr Cowen partly mollified local opposition by also announcing that Shannon would get its own, dedicated, year-round flight to New York and that the transatlantic fleet would be based in Shannon. "We were astonished, it was more than we expected," said a member of SIGNAL, the Shannon workers' lobby group that had trenchantly opposed the direct flights from Dublin.

Now, they say, they were "conned".

Since the introduction of the direct flights at the end of March, according to SIGNAL's co-ordinator, Mr Paddy O'Sullivan, sales in the duty-free shop have dropped by 50 per cent, the bar and food takings are down and the uptake of fuel has been reduced. Last Thursday morning, 25 people got off the Delta flight at Shannon. "You'd get more people off a bus," says Mr Tony Russell, of Alamo-Treaty Rent-a-Car.

Mr Tony Walsh of SIPTU, which represents many workers at Shannon, expresses concern at the drop-off in business. He fears that the commitment of Mr Cowen — and Aer Lingus — to give Shannon its own year-round service to the US is not as firm as it sounded in January.

This concern is now widespread in Shannon following recent remarks by Mr Cowen and Mr Cahill. Replying to a Dail question on March 30th, Mr Cowen said: "On the off-season, I can give an assurance that, based on commercial decisions, all year-round flights are proposed for Shannon." In an interview with the *Clare Champion*, Mr Cahill said it was up to all the interests in the Shannon region to pull their weight in ensuring that Aer Lingus could fill the Shannon service in the winter.

"That's a veiled threat, no other word for it," Mr Russell says. Mr Walsh also fears that a situation may be engineered in which Aer Lingus will abandon the winter service out of Shannon, claiming that the Shannon interests did not play their part.

Mr Pat O'Brien, a Fianna Fail



A Shannon protest in Limerick in April 1992: "They don't know if they can believe the national airline."

member of Shannon Town Commissioners, says that no day goes by now without people in Shannon Airport asking if their jobs are safe. "People feel very annoyed and conned by what is happening," according to Mr O'Brien. "They don't know if they can believe the national airline."

Their concern is all the greater, he adds, because Aer Lingus is known to be negotiating to sell SRS, an aircraft maintenance company which is the airline's largest subsidiary in Shannon.

The Government parties in the area will be damaged in the local and European elections, Mr O'Brien believes. Like most Fianna Fail public representatives in Clare, including the two TDs, Mr Tony Killeen and Ms Sile de Valera, Mr O'Brien is "outside the fold" of the Fianna Fail whip, an exile which, in the current mood, is going to help rather than hurt.

Mr Tony Brazil of Limerick Travel says it has been unfortunate that the direct flights from

Dublin will mean for two months a compulsory stop there for passengers who get on at Shannon. Aer Lingus should have been able to devise a better plan that would have defused the current anger in Shannon, he adds.

However, Mr Brazil does not share the scepticism of others about the thrust of the Aer Lingus plan. The Shannon people will be reassured, he says, when they see the terrific season they are going to have from the US in 1994.

Mr John Fahy, of the Limerick Inn, one of the city's largest hotels, says that the current problems are a "temporary blip" caused by the fact that Shannon's customers are being obliged for the time being to go to Dublin when they want to go to New York. He adds that the region's hotels are ready to co-operate with Aer Lingus in developing a winter season out of the US. "I believe there is a market for it. I came across on a full flight from New York in February, full of people

FACT FILE

- The main employer at Shannon Airport is Aer Rianta, with 550 staff, about 40 of them in the duty-free shop
- Aer Lingus has 250 people in Shannon
- SRS, Aer Lingus's aircraft maintenance subsidiary which is being sold, employs 101 people
- There are over a dozen car hire firms based in Shannon, each employing about three or four people
- The other main user of Shannon Airport, Aeroflot, employs 15 people

doing pub tours and shopping."

A particular difficulty the Shannon people have is marketing the Dublin direct service. They complain, in particular, that Aer

Lingus is advertising heavily in Cork and a Cork-Dublin-New York ticket costs the same as a Dublin-New York ticket. Cork, they claim, is part of Shannon's natural catchment and should not be poached by Dublin.

Mr Tom McInerney, general manager of the new Aer Lingus Shannon division, explains that the heavy advertising in Cork is principally due to the fact that Cork people were among those flying to London to connect with a US flight.

Aer Lingus Shannon will shortly begin a major advertising campaign to launch the new direct Airbus service out of Shannon. Among the innovations in the new service, Mr McInerney adds, will be a free limousine service for premier class passengers within a 40-mile radius of Shannon.

Aer Lingus is thoroughly committed to the success of its Shannon operations and the critics should stop "whingeing", Mr McInerney says. The direct flights

to the US out of Shannon will move from two a week, to three a week, to four a week, to five a week until the daily Airbus service comes into effect on June 1st. Even as matters stand, Shannon has been benefiting from the fact that the food for the jumbos is now taken aboard at Shannon.

Mr Barry O'Shea, Aer Rianta's general manager of marketing for Shannon Airport, believes that it is not yet possible to gauge whether the direct Dublin flight will cause permanent damage to Shannon's facilities.

Mr O'Sullivan fears that permanent damage is almost inevitable. He regrets the decision of Mr Cowen not to publish the Shannon Task Force report which, he believes, could have provided a new impetus for considering Shannon as an engine of regional development. The tragedy of the depopulation of the west of Ireland could be visited on Shannon if its role is to become a regional airport.

£10m refurbish plan cri

THE Government spend £10 million overcrowding in has been attacked Aid, which says could be better use more refuge space and children flee the home.

The organisation woman, Ms McDermott, said shortage of refuge forced women and stay in bed and walk the streets or return to v against their will.

"A long-term p to protect vulne and children in Ms McDermott. the interim we co families to the ne Dail Eireann."

Debt rel Uganda

The develop Oxfam has asked ment to support relief for Uganda meeting of the W International M in Washington I Uganda is the poorest country priority for Irish

According to t series of Oxfam mark the 50th t the two interna agencies, the IN sible for "much woes", with mor cent of Uganda's ings going to serv national debt.

Out of its t debt service of \$ 1993-2010, some will go to creditor the report.

Body of man rec

The body of Galway city man from the River C after he had falle near the Salmon some hours ear returning home from a late-night

He was na Michael Ridge, Newcastle. Hi brought to Univ Hospital where was carried out.

Meanwhile, g taining their se who jumped off April 7th last.

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