

## Highlands and Islands Christmas air travel faces disarray as union votes for strike action

By Simon Warburton

December 2, 2022, 1:06 pm

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Remote airports such as Tiree (pictured) could be hit by a Christmas walkout. Image: Hitrans.

Thousands of air travellers across the Highlands and Islands are facing potential catastrophic disruption to their Christmas and New Year travel plans after members of the Unite union overwhelmingly voted to take strike action.

Unite says 73.5% of its members voted in favour of taking direct strike action and 92.8% for work-to-rule following their flat rejection of a 5% pay offer from Highlands and Islands Airports (HIAL).

However, the decision remains mired in confusion as Unite is declining to specify what dates any strike could take place or the nature of what any work-to-rule could entail, a move HIAL describes as “unhelpful”.



Airports cannot operate without adequate fire crews. Image: HIAL.

The union wields major influence at all 11 HIAL airports across the north and on the islands, representing a significant number of fire crews essential to the operation of all flights as well as in security and administration.

The 11 airports across the HIAL group are Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Dundee, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree and Wick.

Passengers with booked flights out of some of Scotland's most remote communities will be checking news anxiously to see if planned trips to friends and relatives at one of the most important and busy times of the year will be thrown into chaos.

Despite Unite dangling a travel Sword of Damocles over travellers' heads as they look to have the first relatively normal Christmas since the pandemic, the union remains unapologetic.

**'Unacceptable'**

It cites a retail price index inflation rate of 14.2% for its action and has slammed HIAL's offer of 5% as "unacceptable."

The union is now calling on Holyrood to meet the labour body, staff and HIAL to improve pay, terms and conditions in the Highlands and Islands.

Unite industrial officer Shauna Wright insisted to the Press and Journal that the public would understand why such draconian action is being threatened and that it already knew any strike dates.

She said: "We do know what dates we are going to go for but until the employer is served legally, we can't release them."



Stornoway Airport could also be hit by strikes. Image: Sandy McCook/DCT Media.

"I would like to think the public are not naive enough to think, like the nurses, teachers, postal workers, local authority staff, our members also provide a service.

"They live on the islands, they are born on the islands and have families on the islands.

They didn't take this decision lightly and when they had to make a choice between food, heating and getting an increase, why should they be treated less favourably than anyone else?

"We would like to think at Christmas, but any other time of the year, members of the public will support our members in getting what they deserve."

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham noted airport workers across Highland and Island communities "simply can't afford" to live on their current wages.

She added: "To then present them with what amounts to a significant pay cut at a time of rocketing living costs leaves them with no other course of action but to take a stand.

"The Scottish Government and HIAL have to act to deliver on pay or face a rural workforce crisis. Unite's members working across these 11 airports have emphatically backed industrial action and they will have their union's full support in their fight for better jobs, pay and conditions."

A HIAL spokesman said: "Unite's media statement is unhelpful as it does not explain what industrial action will take place, or the dates it will commence.

"This makes it difficult for airlines and their customers to plan, creating unnecessary anxiety for passengers and communities over the festive period.



HIAL managing director Inglis Lyon. Image: Sandy McCook/DCT Media.

“We recognise the challenges our colleagues face due to inflationary pressures and the cost-of-living crisis. Nonetheless, we are disappointed they have voted for industrial action.

“The enhanced offer we presented maximised the flexibility within the Scottish government’s pay policy.

“HIAL will do all it can to minimise any disruption caused by industrial action over the festive period and we urge Unite to continue to engage in constructive dialogue and work with us to find a resolution.”

## **Broader spending review by Scottish government**

Rejection by unions of the pay deal follows news from HIAL in September it would not proceed with parts of an air traffic modernisation plan following a cut in its budget from Transport Scotland.

The move came after a broader spending review by the Scottish government in May and will see

HIAL “scale back” its project.