ALLEGIANT PILOT SAYS HE WAS WRONGLY FIRED OVER EVACUATION

News / Airlines

A pilot who ordered an emergency evacuation after smoke was detected coming from one of the jet's engines is suing Allegiant Air for firing him.

The 43-year-old pilot says Allegiant is putting profits above safety. Allegiant says the evacuation was unnecessary and put passengers at risk - several were injured sliding down inflatable escape chutes.

The incident in June was one of many over the summer that brought unflattering attention to Allegiant. The Teamsters union, which is trying to negotiate Allegiant pilots' first union contract, has publicized the events and accused the airline of cutting corners on safety.

The case highlights a natural tension in the airline industry: Captains are responsible for safety on the plane, but airlines can and do judge their work.

On June 8, Jason Kinzer was the captain of an Allegiant Air jet with 141 passengers scheduled to fly from St. Petersburg, Florida, to Hagerstown, Maryland. Minutes after takeoff, Kinzer says, flight

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attendants called the cockpit to report smelling smoke, so he declared an emergency and returned to the airport.

Kinzer said he rolled to the end of the runway, where the plane was met by emergency vehicles. According to a transcript of airport radio transmissions, a fire-and-rescue worker detected smoke coming from one of the two engines on the McDonnell Douglas MD-80.

Kinzer told airport officials he planned to evacuate the plane. On the recording, someone can be heard telling the pilot to wait, but the person didn't identify himself or give a reason for the delay. Kinzer then ordered passengers to evacuate.

In a July 23 termination letter, Allegiant chief pilot Mark Grock told Kinzer that he "ordered an evacuation that was entirely unwarranted and ... compromised the safety of your crew and your passengers and led directly to the injuries."

Kinzer said he first learned of his dismissal in an earlier phone call during which a personnel staffer said he was being fired because the flight was one of several incidents that brought negative attention to Allegiant. He did not record the call, and Allegiant spokeswoman Kimberly Schaefer disputed that the airline would fire someone over an issue of "public perception." She said terminations are made only after thorough investigations.

The company "values the safety of our passengers and crew above all else," Schaefer said. "Allegiant is a safe airline."

Evacuations are expensive for airlines. Allegiant declined to say how much it cost to reinstall the emergency chutes on Kinzer's plane, but after a JetBlue flight attendant intentionally deployed a slide in 2010, a police report said replacing the chute cost more than US$25,000 - that was one slide on a much smaller plane than Kinzer's MD-80, which had four slides.

In an interview this week, Kinzer, who joined Allegiant in January 2013, said the airline's own operations manual calls for evacuation in case of a potential fire.

"I have not had a moment of remorse over this," he said. "No aviator should ever feel the fear of retribution ... (for) doing something in the interest of safety."

Todd Curtis, a former Boeing safety engineer who runs a safety foundation, said crews may have to act quickly and with incomplete information. He said that airlines shouldn't second-guess crews unless there is strong evidence that the evacuation was ordered "for reasons that had nothing to do with safety."

Injuries happen in evacuations but are usually not fatal, while in a fire even a delay of a few seconds can cost lives, Curtis said.

Bryan Dougherty, a passenger, said once the Allegiant captain gave the evacuation order, "It was pure mayhem. Everybody was pushing everybody." He said an older woman who was pushed down a chute by a flight attendant wound up going to the hospital.

Dougherty said he didn't smell smoke before the evacuation but that others sitting in the back of the plane did. He didn't think it was necessary to use emergency slides, but added, "I'm no airline expert."

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The wrongful-termination lawsuit was filed Tuesday in state court in Las Vegas, where parent Allegiant Travel Co. is based.

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