

Avianova Faces Suit for Defaming Expats

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The  **Moscow Times**

Expatriate managers kicked out of airline Avianova in an apparent shareholder dispute will sue the company over allegations of wrongdoing, they said Friday.

Avianova chief executive Andrew Pyne told The Moscow Times that he and his colleagues have already begun consulting with lawyers over claims made by Avianova that they had been fired for improper and legally dubious behavior.

"We reject unreservedly any suggestion of impropriety or illegal behavior by any member of the senior management team and will be taking legal action against comments made in this regard by LLC Avianova," the managers said in a statement.

The rebuttal follows a statement by Avianova on July 14 in which the company's general director Vladimir Gorbunov said Pyne had "demonstrated his unwillingness to work in compliance with Russian laws and emphasized his intention to work solely in accordance with his own rules."

Gorbunov said he was obliged to remove Pyne and other Russian and expatriate executives from their positions after regulatory agencies brought repeated legislative violations to his attention.

The company also alleged that chief commercial officer Michael Hayden was responsible for the company's loss of 4.5 million rubles (\$160,000).

But the managers said the accusations were being "manufactured, primarily to justify retrospectively improper and arguably illegal actions taken by one set of shareholders on 24 June 2011," the managers wrote.

"We are not the ones in noncompliance with Russian law: on the morning of 24 June, A1, working through its agents, unilaterally abrogated all existing agreements and understandings and effectively hijacked LLC Avianova for its own ends, without regard to the rights of the other shareholders, management or due legal process," the statement continued.

In the strongly worded statement released late Friday, the expat managers, who remain in Moscow, said they believed relations between the shareholders had broken down so badly that only a "speedy" change in the "shareholder mix," could resolve the matter.

"We no longer believe that the current shareholders will be able to resolve their differences in a manner which provides a stable platform for further growth," the managers said.

Neither the managers nor the current administration of Avianova could be reached for comment Friday.

Pyne, Hayden and several other expat managers and Russian staff were barred from the Avianova offices on June 24.

Pyne has said he and his colleagues are "collateral damage" in a shareholder dispute.

Avianova is 51 percent owned by A1, the investment branch of Mikhail Fridman's Alfa Group. Arizona-based investment firm Indigo Partners holds the other 49 percent.

The shareholders had been due to meet last week, but the meeting was postponed.

Neither A1 nor Indigo Partners could be reached for comment Friday evening.

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