

### *Marking PATCO's Crash, Labor's Loss, and the FAA's Folly*

On August 3 a quarter century will have passed since four out of five of the nation's air traffic controllers dared to strike against the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA). As the day progressed Philadelphia's International Airport unexpectedly included the rare sight of zesty picketing PATCO unionists, their ranks bolstered by scores of supporters from area unions and pro-Labor NGOs. Over long weeks thereafter area unionists hosted colorful rallies of support, generously offered groceries and rent money, and even shared leads to (scarce) job openings. In many such ways the area response provided some of the finest hours ever for the Philadelphia labor community.

To be sure, the strikers needed all the help Philadelphians could muster, and then some, as their effort crashed more emphatically than any of them might have feared. Within 48 hours of the strike's start some 11,345 strikers chose to defy a return-to-work order from President Ronald Reagan – the only White House head to have ever led a union (Screen Actors Guild). To their astonishment the president had them summarily fired, banned for life from returning to their federal careers, and ordered the decertification and destruction of their union. Previous presidents, in sharp contrast, had diplomatically ordered the resumption of stalled bargaining, the token firing of a few key union militants (later often quietly rehired), and no attack on a striking union (as it was a vital party to the disputes' resolution).

Labor's losses were major and lasting. For one, the PATCO strike exposed bitter inter-union rivalries, as between the Pilots Union and PATCO. This weakened a valued perception of Labor solidarity. (Little media notice was taken of \$750,000 in aid raised by Labor for the strikers, or the AFL-CIO's relentless effort to get Reagan to soften his blow). For another, the strike revealed the willingness of many to cross a picket line and take the jobs of strikers, this a blow to any notion entertained of working-class solidarity. And the strike led the media to mercilessly trash the PATCO's bargaining demands, and by inference, denigrate those of all unions.

The greatest loss concerned the ability of unionists to withdraw their labor power. Employers threatened after PATCO's debacle to

hire permanent replacements for all economic strikers, much as the FAA had done with Reagan's blessings. No single development before '81 or since has hurt Labor as severely as this one. Strikes of 1000 workers or more declined from 424 in 1974 (high water mark) to 17 in 2004. Unsuccessful in getting relief from Congress, Labor continues to be stymied here, a wound it cannot seem to heal. AFL-CIO Vice President Richard Trumpka warns that without its "only true weapon – the right to strike – organized labor in America will soon cease to exist."

In sum, the strikers paid a very high price (only 846 have been rehired since Clinton ended the Blacklist in 1993). And Labor continues to suffer. But ironically, the FAA may be the biggest loser of all. In 1981 it celebrated with Champaign its unexpected union-free status, and swore Labor would never again darken its door. But it could not change its culture of mis-management fast enough, and instead continued to behave as badly as had the PATCO strikers charged. Its persistent resort to Prussian ways, insensitive rules, and abuses of human dignity led its striker replacement workforce to unionize in the 1980s. Their creation of the National Air Traffic Controllers Union (NATCA, AFL-CIO) was arguably the most significant endorsement in modern times of the idea that workers need unions if management is to be kept from acting on its own worse impulses.

Today the situation has a Ground Hog Day feel that can only cause unease among millions of air travelers. Once again, as in 1980-1981, the union of air traffic controllers and the FAA are at loggerheads. Bargaining broke down in July and the FAA has imposed its last best offer on a sullen, angry, and hurting workforce. NATCA insists (mush as did PATCO in 1981) that the National Airspace System is threatened by the FAA's reckless reliance on low staffing levels, outdated equipment, a failed modernization effort, the unilateral implementation of work rule changes, and an unprecedented and unprovoked attack on the union. NATCA members, like those of PATCO in '81, are sick and tired of being sick and tired, the big difference being their resolve not to lose it all as did PATCO.

Twenty-five years later, the Philadelphia Airport need not soon expect another PATCO-like picket line of aroused controllers and enthusiastic supporters, save perhaps one (legally) devoted to information sharing. What Philadelphians can expect are requests to

support NATCA efforts to get Congress to force long overdue, pro-worker reforms in the FAA. While a “flight path” PATCO recklessly veered off of into the ground, a wiser NATCA intends instead to long stay with it, and remain on course. The controllers union insists its professional duty to help protect air passengers requires nothing less.

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