

PATCO's 1981 Strike: Leadership Coordinates - A Unionists' Perspective

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The 1981 PATCO Strike changed the nature of labor-management relations, the survival odds of trade unionism in this country, and the plausibility of the strike option. On its 25th anniversary (August 3, 2006) Organized Labor and concerned academics are urged to take account of six major lessons ("coordinates") drawn from the strike record that can help improve the Movement's leadership.

For the last quarter century strikes have rarely been part of 20,000 annual contract negotiation processes. Academics cite in partial explanation the increasing ability of employers to hire replacement workers, along with a steady decrease in percent of union workers at many workplaces - "two matters conspicuous in what was one of the most consequential labor-management dispute of modern times - the 1981 Strike of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization." (herein after PATCO) (Maher, November 15, 2005) That strike shocked everyone with its final price, as almost 75% of the nation's 17,500 air traffic controllers were fired and banned from ever again getting federal employment. Their union was decertified and destroyed, the first such action ever undertaken by the federal government. Employers felt encouraged to rely on permanent striker replacements when struck, and the number of strikes, which had been declining beforehand, rapidly fell far off. Characterized by journalist Thomas B. Edsall as "one of the most stunning blows [ever suffered by] Organized Labor," the ill-fated strike cast a long and dark shadow. (Edsall)

Taking timely and pragmatic lessons from the PATCO Strike and its aftermath has become all the more important because the number of strikes in America has unexpectedly begun growing again. (Maher, November 15, 2005) Some academics attribute the turnabout in large part to backlash against harsh negotiating postures, along with a belief that prosperous companies might pay more if pressured to do so. According to Professor Gary Chaison, the upsurge is "a sign of frustration, almost to the point of desperation. For many workers, there is no alternative. They feel they were badly beaten up in past negotiations or that companies are making tremendous demands on them." (Maher, November 15, 2005) Similarly, Professor Marick F. Masters maintains unions are in an environment of shrinking alternatives. There are just not many good options left at this time. (Maher, September 16, 2005) Unions, explains Bruce Raynor, president of Unite Here, a 450,000-member labor organization, "are fed up with efforts by employers to take a hard line unnecessarily. Unions are in a fighting mode." (Maher, November 15, 2005)

This newfound militancy notwithstanding, the loss of a strike can point up weaknesses Labor would rather not reveal. (Maher, November 15, 2005) Indeed, the abject defeat in

2005 of the strike of 4,000 Northwest Airlines mechanics, with the loss of all of their jobs to striker replacements, underlines his point. Strikes threatened in 2006 by Delphi employees, Delta pilots, and even members of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association call to mind the 1981 PATCO strike, as the overnight job loss of over 11,340 PATCO strikers exposed far more weakness in unionism than was good for Labor then or now. Given a current upturn in the actual and possible use of strikes, and the related need of Organized Labor to reinvigorate itself, it is appropriate to ask on the strike's 25th anniversary what Organized Labor might learn from it. Even as controllers provide pilots with coordinates to vector the best flight plan, coordinate-like lessons in leadership can and must be extracted from PATCO's tale: Six such guides are arranged below in chronological order, following a short synopsis of the union's history. (1)

I. Background. In 1962 President John F. Kennedy granted federal employees the right to form unions. Four years later air traffic controllers (herein after ATCs) began to create PATCO, the first-ever national ATC labor union. It soon earned recognition as the exclusive bargaining representative from an ambivalent and suspicious employer, then called the Federal Aviation Authority (herein the FAA; the name was later changed to Administration). PATCO's first leaders briefly tried to define the organization as a formal professional association, a high-status and genteel operation. It sought an accommodation with the FAA, and initially even had a few FAA staffers in membership (ATCs who had moved up the ladder). However, after 18 months of bruising and humiliating confrontations, the same PATCO leaders chose in 1968 a traditional labor union format in place of the original professional association model. In short order, labor-management relations soured. The two sides heartedly disagreed about manpower needs (PATCO wanted more immediate and significant hiring), the adequacy of ATC equipment (PATCO insisted much of it undermined air travel safety), the fairness of compensation (PATCO wanted higher salaries and better fringes), the reasonableness of mandatory overtime (PATCO wanted it ended), the culture of the workplace (the FAA preferred a militaristic, command-control style), and 101 other contentious matters. This shift in emphasis and culture later made possible three related (illegal) strike actions between 1970 and 1981 (before the Big One).

From its founding as a union in 1968 PATCO was divided between two mutually suspicious blocs. One believed work-related gains came more readily and reliably from meeting management half way; its members were upwardly mobile types open even to promotion into FAA management (some supported the idea of membership eligibility for FAA staffers, an option defeated by only 3% of the vote in 1968). Pro-conciliation types were somewhat satisfied with their situation at work. They expected it to slowly, if unevenly improve, and many cautiously trusted the goodwill of some progressive staffers in the FAA. The other bloc insisted the FAA management only shared what it was forced to give up, as Class Warfare shaped history: Its members would intent on rising as feisty militants in union ranks. They were fairly dissatisfied at work, and expected the ATC workplace situation to steadily worsen. They distrusted the motives of the FAA, and preferred rousing anti-employer rhetoric and related militant actions (such as "work-to-rule" job actions). This historic, widespread, and sharp division between competing work

world cultures, by no means unique to the controllers union, endlessly challenged union solidarity and well-being.

While as federal employees the ATCs had taken an oath never to strike (or suffer civil and criminal penalties), PATCO members were nevertheless soon involved in a short sickout (1970), a 21-day work-to-rule job action (1973), and a short wildcat strike by an especially feisty Chicago tower crew (1980). However, in keeping with membership ambivalence about saber-rattling, for its first 10 years PATCO elected and re-elected a very conciliatory president, John F. Leyden. Personally and politically adroit, he sought always to work matters out, forge personal alliances with key FAA and Congressional power-holders, and resist persistent calls to arms by ATC militants. From 1970 through 1980 the Leyden's leadership team actually discouraged illegal acts, and sought instead to promote cooperation with the FAA.

So long as Leyden had both sides believing they had his ear and his respect, PATCO had made significant gains: Under his ten-year leadership the union had bargained three ever-better contracts, won major grievances, improved its organizational infrastructure, earned increasing congressional support for pro-controller legislation, enjoyed media and public approval, attracted more and more controllers into voluntary membership, and so on. This conciliatory policy, however, left many members dissatisfied, as the rewards seemed relatively minor to them, and FAA harassment was unpredictable and exasperating. In 1980 the PATCO Board chose as president Robert Poli, a militant intent instead on forcing gains from a comparably resolute FAA. Poli insisted the air travel system could not run without PATCO members manning the scopes. The strikers would therefore be safe from harm (no firings) and quickly victorious (the industry, after suffering great immediate financial losses, would rally the business community to force Congress and the FAA to quickly agree to PATCO's contract demands). Word circulated about secret FAA strike response plans then being drafted in collaboration with airline and industry representatives. Word also circulated about FAA plans to immediately replace strikers with surplus military air traffic controllers and stockpiled supervisors. But the Poli team dismissed these two ominous possibilities as empty PR efforts by the FAA to intimidate potential PATCO strikers.

On August 3, 1981, after seven months of stalemated bargaining, which included the union's rejection of the Last Best Offer by the FAA, nearly 12,500 out of 17,500 controllers struck (85% of PATCO's members). Ordered by an outraged President Reagan to return to work within 48 hours or be fired, over 11,350 strikers gave up their ATC jobs and were immediately thereafter barred from all federal employment, and on October 27, 1981, PATCO was decertified. Union officers marched on PATCO's picket line (the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants stood out). Hundreds of locals from coast to coast ran PATCO rallies and lent the strikers free meeting space. Hundreds of thousands of dollars was raised to help PATCO families meet their bills (the PATCO Strike Fund had been immediately seized by the Courts). Best of all, even though unemployment was rising across the nation, many locals went out of their way to refer ex-controllers to scarce job openings. Nevertheless, the shock was so great, and the disappointment so deep that many families broke up, divorces were common, suicides

were noted, and a few hundred strikers left the country for ATC posts overseas. It was not until August 12, 1993, when President William J. Clinton signed an Executive Order lifting the ban ("Blacklist") on rehiring the PATCO strikers as controllers that the disastrous strike symbolically ended.

Six years after the PATCO wipeout, on June 19th, 1987, a new union was formed by striker replacements and new hires. Named the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (herein after NATCA), it became an AFL-CIO independent affiliate in 1988. Relations between NATCA and the FAA, while briefly cooperative in the early 1990s, have since soured, and the two sides presently disagree about manpower needs (NATCA wants immediate and significant hiring), the adequacy of equipment (NATCA contends some of it threatens air traveler safety), the culture of the workplace (the FAA favors a top-down no-nonsense style), and 101 contentious matters. As with PATCO decades before, and in an eerie Groundhog Day fashion, NATCA now raises damning questions about the safety of the air traffic control system, the integrity and "smarts" of the FAA, and the agency's seeming preference to endlessly squabble with its own employees. (Church)

1. Lessons from the Strike. Given this background, at least six lessons about leadership warrant attention and adaptation, each a coordinate-of-sorts that Organized Labor must take into account if it is to avoid repeating PATCO's many leadership mistakes.

First Lesson: Listen Respectfully. Throughout his ten-year presidency John F. Leyden, although clearly identified with the conciliatory bloc, took care to hear and treat with respect militant union members who thoroughly opposed his anti-strike approach. Thanks to this diplomatic approach his administration was able for the longest time to restrain hotheads and extreme macho types found in all labor unions, but especially consequential in work cultures whose members are accustomed to barking out orders and having them immediately obeyed (the nature of the controller-pilot interaction). PATCO militants were accustomed to being listened to when they spoke, to being heeded without question (lest, for example, a midair collision occur). Accordingly, PATCO militants fully expected an attentive audience from a solicitous Leyden, and he was smart enough to artfully provide it. Indeed, Leyden was masterful at balancing all of the many competing factions within the union (caucuses arranged by job title, gender, race, region, political party preference, etc.) The lesson, in short: Give factions, especially the Opposition, the high quality of hearing you would want for yourself.

Second Lesson: Follow the Money! Sensitive to the ego needs of the militant opposition, in 1980 Leyden created a nationwide cadre of volunteers, known euphemistically as the Choir Boys, to serve as pro-strike Shock Troops (but under his control as founder and commander-in-chief). An elite team of "commandos," they were to assure members the FAA could not fire all the controllers, only the Choir Boys and top leaders if and when a strike had to be called. Leyden believed this a clever preemptive act on his part as he suspected if he hadn't created the cadre the arch militants would form a pro-strike structure he could not control. What he forgot was to follow the money, to remember the power of the paymaster. The Choir Boys were paid from a separate budget controlled

by Leyden's macho and charismatic Vice- President, Robert Poli, a man to whom they quickly became especially loyal. Choir Boys traveled widely squashing support for Leyden's conciliatory ways, intimidating pro-Leyden peers, and nurturing a macho culture of ever-higher expectations of possible contract gains. The lesson, in short: Keep your lieutenants on your own payroll, rather than have anyone else sign their checks.

Third Lesson: Stay Committed. Matters reached a crescendo at a January 7th, 1980, meeting of the PATCO Board of Directors (many Choir Boys were coincidentally there as earnest observers). Poli, who had declared he was going to run against Leyden, made a series of very personal charges against the incumbent, accusing him of spending PATCO funds for personal uses, etc. So heated were Leyden's defense and the ensuing arguments that Poli angrily announced his resignation and stomped out of the room. Leyden, losing his focus on what was best for PATCO, did like wise. Poli's supporters on the Board seized the moment, and maneuvered the Board to reject Poli's resignation and accept Leyden's. With the Board still in session Leyden was begged by his supporters to withdraw his resignation and resume the union's presidency. To their ever-lasting dismay, he declared his word was his bond, and his decision was irreversible. In this way Leyden snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, and turned PATCO over to his archenemies - the "strike-bound Crazies" - a mistake that ranks among the most costly made by any modern labor leader. The lesson, in short: Never lose sight of why you are serving to begin with; don't let ego bruises trump clear-eyed commitment.

Fourth Lesson: Court the Public. Convinced victory was the only possible outcome the Poli team downgraded any serious, sustained, and substantial effort to try and win over the public. Its press kit was thin, its press releases done on the fly, and its press relations staff held to a single (albeit talented) controller. Ironically, the union sorely undervalued its own positive experience with winning public opinion over to its side in earlier job actions. At those times the PATCO controllers earned sympathy for working under extraordinary stress (the union claimed nine out of ten controllers did not survive to normal retirement age). It got positive attention to its charge that the FAA was endangering air travel by being inordinately slow in updating ATC equipment. Much as did the UPS strikers in the late 1990s, PATCO won media representation as White Hat types in a David-and Goliath contest with an insensitive and harsh management - a position of strength the FAA felt obliged back then to respect. Public opinion is referred to as a "court" for a good reason. It can make the difference, since policy-shapers and lawmakers pay it keen attention (hence, the ever-greater importance of the nation's polling organizations). The lesson, in short: Pursue public goodwill. (NATCA's very impressive web site and high-quality hard copy material attest to its sage grasp of a lesson lost on Poli and his PATCO administration).

Fifth Lesson: Court Alliances. From its development in 1968 on across its short 12-year existence PATCO was wary of entangling alliances with other labor organizations. It accepted an affiliation in 1970 with the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association (MEBA-AFL-CIO) only after being assured of complete autonomy. PATCO saw itself as a unique white-collar/technical worker organization, one of the first created by the so-

called New Worker. It kept a haughty aloofness from traditional blue-collar outfits it judged to have less social status and social significance (such as locals of the gritty Machinists Union and of the Electrical Workers Union, along with Teamster locals of low-wage baggage handlers, etc.) This coolness extended to ignoring picket lines operated by other unions at the airfields, a slight to solidarity never forgotten or forgiven by the bitter picketers. The rah-rah views of the Choir Boys combined with controller ambivalence about unionism per se, and about aligning with other (lower status) workers. However, despite PATCO's self-imposed isolation the AFL-CIO and several relevant affiliates came through with desperately needed aid funds, groceries, shelter, meeting halls, and job referrals when the '81 strike occurred (a development that shocked Labor, as PATCO had not bothered to keep others, including MEBA, informed of its plans). The lesson, in short: Seek and deserve solidarity, as you never know when you may need it.

Sixth Lesson: Accept Compromise. Two opportunities unexpectedly presented themselves for a PATCO victory-of-sorts, or at least, less of a total defeat than eventually suffered, but the Poli administration proved incapable of taking advantage of either compromise. In April of 1981 PATCO was offered a contract by the FAA so unexpectedly generous (albeit still far from inflated PATCO contract demands) that Poli asked Leyden to rally his backers in its joint support. Unfortunately, the "strike-bound Crazies" were now dominant, and Poli could not even win over own Board of Directors, better yet the fired-up membership. Similarly, while Leyden understood this could make a strike unnecessary, his followers (many still dismayed by his Chicago resignation) were now too few (and some too frightened of the Choir Boys) to make the difference. (2) Similarly, the AFL-CIO in October, 1981, finally managed to secure an informal surrender offer to enable many high-seniority strikers to slowly regain their jobs. The PATCO Board, however, responded by insisting every striker could return to work. As well, while Poli would resign and assume some blame, they demanded the Secretary of Transportation and the FAA Administrator do likewise, thereby sharing blame. Finally, the offer would have to be put in writing and signed by a relevant top FAA officer. Thoroughly exasperated by this extraordinarily high-handed response the AFL-CIO immediately cut off all further communications with the union. Little wonder PATCO's officials were widely criticized (even within the Labor Movement) as bullheaded, misguided, foolhardy, and worse. (Hurd, 1986) The lesson, in short: Leadership must be prepared to settle for less, the better to resume the struggle down the line.

Academic Contribution. Given the preoccupation of unionists and allied managers with endlessly putting out fires, and their related insistence their plate is always full, few are likely to search out lessons buried in significant past labor-management events, such as the 1981 PATCO Strike. Accordingly, concerned academics must shoulder this responsibility. While resources cited in the References of this article cover quite a bit of the story, much remains 25 years after the strike for exploration.

Attention is owed, for example, to the deep-set appeal unionism has to controllers, as they are in certain important ways much like the so-called New Worker unions must

attract if they are to soon grow again. Controllers are bright college graduates, very able information data processors, and ambitious upwardly mobile types. According to the stereotype they should shun collective action in favor of arch individualism, promote their own well being over that of their group, and seek every possible self-advantage at almost any cost to others. Perhaps, but in the real-world case of air traffic controllers they have twice in modern history opted to unionize. (Noteworthy here is the fact that controllers overseas are commonly unionized: Many of their organizations tried briefly to slow air traffic in support of PATCO, and most sent money to aid the families of the strikers). Accordingly, careful study of the distinctive reasons controllers unionize might help academics better understand Labor's prospects for new growth early in the 21st century, even as it aids union organizers in improving their approach to comparable New Workers.

Related here is the need to study why many NATCA controllers prefer to cooperate rather than fight with FAA management. When NATCA was briefly in a collaborative relationship with a rare pro-worker FAA Administrator in the 1990s the union enthusiastically hailed the situation. Many controllers want any union of theirs to add value to the profession and aid the FAA's mission (maintaining the world's safest airline system). Accordingly, NATCA resents having an adversarial role forced on it by the FAA. NATCA's model of constructive unionism has much in common with the value-added pro-cooperation type now being championed by Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Both admirers and critics of this controversial option would profit from research on the pro-cooperation union the nation's controllers have most recently created in their own image.

A third subject worth further study concerns models for aiding recovery from traumatic loss, or in this case, aiding ex-strikers who unexpectedly and suddenly find themselves jobless. An ex-striker, Bill Taylor, was quick to create and single-handedly maintain for several years a mutual aid organization, PATCO Lives. It offered demoralized and overwhelmed ex-strikers 24/7 highly personal phone counseling, a weekly phone-tape Hot Line to update and dispel rumors, and a drop-in counseling clinic. Research could explore whether this is a transferable model for pragmatic and affordable after-strike assistance other unions could readily adapt.

A fourth focus would explore the exceedingly sensitive matter of NATCA's response to job-seeking actions by ex-strikers. The record here is a very pained one, as many NATCA members feared losing their (low seniority) places to (high seniority) ex-strikers after Pres. Clinton in 1993 lifted the ban on rehiring. Some NATCA members also expected very strained relations would develop between those who had lost their ATC posts and those who took them by crossing the PATCO picket line (still dammed as scabs by certain bitter strikers). Some ex-strikers feel NATCA could and should have done more on the striker's behalf, and they accuse the union of cooperating with the FAA in making rehiring very difficult. NATCA denies all of these charges, and insists it has done its best. Organized Labor has much to learn from research here into how to minimize heartache and acrimony before these cases become ever more common, this highly likely development.

Finally, a potential source of valuable lessons concerns the failure of the FAA to remain union-free. When it unexpectedly found itself in the fall of 1981 no longer obliged to negotiate with PATCO, the FAA resolved to never again allow unionism inside its walls. University-based specialists in Human Relations, Personnel Management, Industrial Psychology, and other such matters were hired to help humanize the ATC work world, and not coincidentally, inoculate the new workforce against unionization (this a possibility the FAA thought implausible, given the origins of the new ATC workers as striker replacements). However, to the everlasting astonishment of the FAA (and to many in Congress), the new post-PATCO controllers took only six years to opt themselves for unionization, a move of relevance to employers trying to decide if unionization is or is not natural, and for unions trying to decide where and how to unionize the New Worker.

Summary. Much more, of course, warrants attention, including these questions: Why does the FAA over the long term seem incapable of maintaining a positive employee relations climate? How might a local or union create the checks and balances necessary to respect the Loyal Opposition? Is it possible for union leaders to keep the expectations of an aroused membership from getting wildly out of bounds? Is it possible to trump militancy with a case for conciliation (slow incrementalism)? How should the government react when Oath-violating strikers flaunt its laws? This list, of course, could be extended, but the point by now is clear: Until every possible lesson is drawn from the PATCO/NATCA/FAA tale we will miss a vital opportunity to improve labor-management relations in and outside of the air transportation world.

Management's leading guru, the late Peter Drucker, insisted a key test of leadership went beyond a conventional focus on achievements to also ask what had a leader stopped. (Forbes, 2005) Taken all in all, labor leadership might learn from the 1981 Strike to stop paranoid wars on the internal Opposition. To stop being careless about who controls payroll sites. To stop being vague about their personal Mission (about the ideals that brought them to seek leadership). To stop undervaluing what the public thinks, and what other unionists are willing to do for you (and vice versa). And to stop believing that victory must be total, and there can be no honor in compromise. Put otherwise, labor leadership can learn from the 1981 Strike to respect the soundest of critics. To stay in control of internal payrolls. To remember the motivation that sparked office-seeking to begin with. To value public opinion, value and earn solidarity, and remain able to reframe setbacks so as not to lose everything. In this way the chances improve for Labor gaining astute and strategic leadership that knows where to go, why, how, when to change course, and how to bring the membership along - the best "poker players" possible. Academics committed to promoting "win-win" labor-management relations can help tutor Labor in these "coordinates," and also help uncover several new ones.

NOTES

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NOTES

1) Naturally, given space limitations much of the long, complex, and convoluted PATCO story is sharply abbreviated (many items cited as References can help fill in the story). Note also that the analysis draws in part on the writer's insider role as the lead Survey Researcher for PATCO from 1980 through the '81 strike. See in this connection, Shostak and Skocik (1986). Outstanding here is a fictional treatment of the story, *Crossing Runways*, by Paddock (2004). A good read, it demonstrates anew how much truth can be uniquely conveyed by fiction based in fact. The paperback book can be had from www.paddackbooks.com

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