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# **In Critical Solidarity**

*Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's  
Section on Labor and Labor Movements*

**Vol. 6, No. 2**

**May 2006**

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## **Air Traffic Controllers Today: Politics, Labor History, and Cultural Reproduction**

Diane Vaughan

Air traffic controllers' labor history lives on in the culture of air traffic control facilities, binding generations of controllers together as an occupational community. I saw the impact of this history during 11 months of full time observation in four air traffic control facilities in the FAA's New England Region, and in about 200 interviews with air traffic controllers and other industry personnel.

When the Reagan administration fired some 11,400 striking controllers in the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization (PATCO) strike, they were quickly replaced by military air traffic controllers and people hired "off the streets." The replacement hires describe an occupational identity permanently marked by the strike. To get to work, they had to pass fired controllers demonstrating outside air traffic control facilities. They were trained by supervisors and controllers, mainly union members who had not participated in the strike for fear of losing their jobs. Although desperate for new controllers to help with the workload, those who did not strike resented the replacement hires for taking the places of their coworkers and made training in the ATC's apprentice system difficult if not unbearable for the replacements. Twenty-five years later, those who trained in the early 80s still self-define as replacement hires.

Labor history also lived on in the founding of the National Air Traffic Controllers' Association (NATCA) in 1986, which was forged from lessons learned in 1981 and passed on to the replacements by strikers and PATCO leaders. The rebirth of the union was fueled by the same concerns that precipitated the 1981 strike – wages, understaffing, and technology – and cemented by controllers' <continued on p. 3>

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## **Labor Inspectors in Latin America**

**Michael Piore and Andrew Schrank**

Latin American governments face a dilemma. The United States and Canada are beginning to impose labor standards on their less developed trading partners. Latin American exporters are particularly dependent upon US and Canadian markets. And Latin American policymakers are therefore scrambling to make de jure—if not necessarily de facto—improvements to their labor laws and practices.

Observers part company, however, over the consequences of their efforts. While labor and human rights activists portray the reforms as almost exclusively cosmetic in nature, and therefore embrace non-governmental efforts and independent monitoring campaigns, their critics—including the orthodox economists who tend to dominate the international financial institutions—portray labor market regulation as an impediment to economic adjustment, and therefore decry the diffusion of labor standards in the first place. Who is correct? Our ongoing research in Mexico, Central America, and the Dominican Republic suggests that the former perspective is incomplete and the latter argument is inaccurate. <continued on p. 4>

**Research & Activism**

**Analyzing the Good Fight**

Sarah Laslett

In May of 2005, the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies at the University of Washington, with support from the journal *Politics and Society*, sponsored a conference on “Caring Labor.” (Articles from that conference can be found in the March 2006 issue of *Politics and Society*.) The conference was designed to provide opportunities for discussion among academics, practitioners, and union activists about the conditions facing those who provide caring labor and attempts to address them via public policy and labor organizing. Approximately ten conference participants were activists and/or practitioners, and twenty were academics.

Asked to write something for this newsletter about the conference, I began to think about what a successful collaboration between academics and activists looks like from both perspectives. We made a real effort to create a forum for dialogue between these individuals and the communities they represented. And yet, in retrospect, I find it far more difficult to assess the success of this event in concrete terms for the activists and practitioners than for the academics. I asked a few people in both groups about their thoughts on the conference.

One scholar told me that the paper he presented received such useful critical feedback from the board of *Politics and Society* that he undertook not only a serious revision of the paper, but a deep re-thinking of his analysis. The final product has been published and, as a junior faculty member with his eye on the tenure clock, this is an important success, both intellectually and professionally. In our conversation, however, we were both embarrassed to realize that neither of us could remember what the activists from that same panel had to say, nor did we have any particular sense of whether or not the conference had been useful to them. I followed up.

One activist told me he thought academic research was often useful but lamented that there had not been enough time during the conference for networking or in-depth discussion. He also said that he had wanted to stay in touch with one of the researchers but had not followed through. What these two stories tell me is that, even for academics who value the work and input of activists, and visa versa, lines of communication still need to be created. The occasional conference encounter does not provide the kinds of opportunities for ongoing collaboration between academics and activists as it does among academics.

Participants’ feedback also made clear that different motivations for academics and activists can make collaboration around overlapping questions, or even the gathering of similar kinds of information, difficult. I can identify two key differences in how these groups gather and interpret information about work and workers. The first has to do with timing. In the world of academia, things move at a slow and deliberate pace. Research can go on for years, and findings can be published long after the study is complete. This deliberate and thorough approach is a significant part of what gives academic study its credibility. For unionists, however, momentum is the name of the game. While planning may take some time, when a campaign starts, delay is death. This is true not only because dragging out a campaign works to the employer’s benefit, but also because unions are sensitive to the fact that they are spending the hard-earned dues dollars of their members on each campaign. Overall, the academic has the (dare I say it?) privilege of long ruminations on the best way to design an analytic framework. For academics, information is the data they need to test a given theoretical model. The information itself is less significant than what the model it feeds may prove or disprove. For the unionist, that same information is a tool that must point to concrete strategic steps.

A second difference between activists and academics has to do with the role of personal narrative. Academics tend to disdain “anecdotal evidence.” While they may be interested in the story of an individual or a small group, they do not see those experiences as providing a basis for a broader argument. But unionists crave individual stories. Statistical significance be damned! The best way to move people is to listen carefully to their stories and, ideally, build solidarity among workers based on those stories. That’s how unionists help

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workers wield power. Again, the different goals of union and academic activity—mobilizing workers versus generating new knowledge—come into tension here.

Academics can do research that is both well-regarded within academia and useful to unions, and unionists can collaborate with academics in ways that are both timely and intellectually rigorous. However, any successful collaboration must at least be aware of, if not struggle to resolve, these tensions. In order to make use of the complementary skills and information from each group, we must begin with the clearest possible articulation from both sides about what the immediate and long-term goals and starting assumptions are. Without this, academics and activists will too often miss each other in the precious few moments they have to engage.

Recently, I saw a terrific example of an academic researcher whose work would have been impossible without the cooperation of union staff, help the labor movement. In September 2005, a sociologist came to Washington State to do a presentation in a leadership training for 75 public sector union members. The sociologist spoke to this group about the emergence of organizing strategies in different eras of U.S. labor history. To anyone familiar with that history, or who pays attention to current labor politics, what she had to say was unsurprising. The surprise was the enthusiastic response she got. Some of the unionists she spoke to were seasoned campaigners; some were at the very earliest stages of development as unionists. The workers were largely white-collar, working in the public education sector. It is likely that the majority of people in that room had gone to college. Yet the history of their own movement was clearly new to many of them. Moreover, to learn how their own struggle fit into the larger historical and political picture of organizing was concretely useful to their development as union leaders. This academic was able to offer them, in just an hour or so, a new perspective on themselves and their fight.

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### New Publications of Interest

Steve McKay, *Satanic Mills or Silicon Islands? The Politics of High-Tech Production in the Philippines* (Cornell University/ILR Press 2006)

*Politics & Society*, March 2006. Articles from the May 2005 Caring Labor Conference at the University of Washington.

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### <Vaughan, continued>

continuing experiences of hierarchy and feelings of alienation and oppression under the first Bush administration. In the 1990s, during the Clinton administration, labor-management relations changed. When I began my fieldwork in 2000, Jane Garvey, a Clinton-appointed FAA administrator, had negotiated a dramatic across-the board wage increase for controllers and supervisors in exchange for NATCA acceptance of new technologies.

This was an era of greater cooperation, based on a labor/management partnership agreement. Controllers had input into management decisionmaking about air traffic operations locally, regionally, and nationally. In the facilities where I observed, FAA traffic managers met with the local NATCA reps several times a day, and controllers volunteered for new responsibilities that helped management. At the national level, union members participated in designing new technologies and redesigning airspace to expedite air traffic. Now with White House support, NATCA had muscle and was flexing it. In local facilities, negotiating differences and filing grievances were continuous processes. Administrators and supervisors who had to deal daily with controllers' objections to local practices were angry that Garvey "gave away the store."

The strike was not forgotten: it remained an occupation-defining moment. The collective memory of it was reinvigorated when fired PATCO controllers reentered the work force under a 1993 Clinton administration decision to rescind the Reagan era rule that the fired controllers could not be employed in FAA air traffic control. In interviews, returned PATCO controllers described their struggle to get their jobs back and their joy at the good news. Twelve years out of the ATC system, having worked at jobs including street sweeping, construction, and business start-ups, PATCO controllers had to be retrained. They were

trained by the replacement hires and subsequent cohorts (some of whom were half the PATCO controllers' ages) who - whether they wanted to or not - got a dose of labor history from those who had been part of it. Training was hard and protracted. They were older and not as quick at working air traffic. Sometimes resentment festered when incoming PATCO controllers' seniority, which they had retained, topped that of replacements. Seniority affected salaries and bidding for shifts and days off; thus, not all trainers were motivated to train PATCO controllers so that they could succeed. Others felt they were heroes. "We owe our jobs to these guys," they said.

Now, in the second Bush administration, labor history repeats. The spectacular success of controllers at clearing the sky of nearly 5,000 airplanes in a little over two hours on September 11<sup>th</sup> notwithstanding, the administration has ended any semblance of partnership. Decision making authority given to controllers during the previous administration was rescinded. Other recent privileges were withdrawn. To gain leverage, NATCA advised members to stop doing the volunteer work they had willingly performed during the "partnership years." NATCA had long urged the FAA to begin hiring to replace the large number of controllers approaching retirement age. Instead, technology was the FAA's remedy for a reduced controller population and increased air traffic.

But that technology was slow in coming. Controllers feared looming staffing losses, which would mean increased workloads and threats to safety. Finally, in 2002, the FAA began hiring small numbers of young controllers, typically graduates of community colleges where aeronautics was a major and air traffic control internships were offered. Ironically, they are training in air traffic control facilities in political and cultural conditions that in many ways parallel those predating the 1981 strike. Wages, understaffing, and technology remain the divisive issues. In air traffic control facilities, controller morale is low; the experience of hierarchy, alienation and oppression is high.

Politics and labor history have combined across generations of controllers to reproduce the pre-strike culture and bind controllers together as an occupational community. As the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PATCO strike approaches, the current contract dispute between NATCA and the FAA has reached an impasse and awaits Congressional action. The main sticking points are salary and

benefits. The FAA argues that previous raises and benefits were excessive and have disabled the ATC system. Controllers fight to retain what they have won for themselves and protect future cohorts. Recently, NATCA asked the FAA to return to the bargaining table; the FAA declined. If Congress fails to act, the FAA offer will be enacted. This time, there is no talk of a strike.

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<Piore & Schrank, continued>

On the one hand, the region's labor ministries are responding to international pressure by expanding and rationalizing their enforcement authorities. For example, the Dominican Republic demands a law degree and a competitive civil service examination of all new inspectors. Guatemala and Costa Rica have advanced educational requirements of their own. And El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua have added inspectors and adopted new enforcement procedures as well. The point is neither to exaggerate the admittedly tentative achievements nor to minimize the very legitimate grievances of Central American workers; it is merely to suggest that the situation on the ground is more complicated—and perhaps more amenable to change—than many North Americans realize.

On the other hand, the region's regulatory regimes are designed to reconcile the public's demand for protection with the market's demand for efficiency—at least in theory—and are therefore unlikely to inhibit growth and adjustment. A small but growing body of literature distinguishes a "tutelary" Franco-Iberian approach to labor law enforcement from the "adversarial" approach more common in the Anglo-American world.

While Anglo-American inspectors hope to deter illicit activity by raising the probability and cost of exposure, and therefore constitute law enforcement officers in the strict sense of the term, their Franco-Iberian counterparts are expected to bring firms into compliance over time, and therefore resemble teachers—who have carrots as well as sticks at their disposal—rather than cops or prosecutors. In fact, the Latin American inspectors we've interviewed not only offer violators the opportunity to correct their transgressions prior to prosecution but frequently serve as consultants in the process—and thereby underwrite the costs of compliance without undermining the prospects for investment, job creation, and growth.

What does the more flexible Latin model look like in practice? Guatemalan inspectors have organized in-plant staffing experiments designed not only to maximize productivity but to facilitate collective bargaining in the apparel export sector. Dominican inspectors are building bridges between inefficient—and therefore noncompliant—enterprises and public sector vocational education and training institutions. And the Mexican Ministry of Labor is working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to simultaneously upgrade production practices and working conditions at the Volkswagen plant in Puebla.

The point is most assuredly *not* that all is well in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Nothing could be further from the truth. Wages are low. Employment is volatile. Union organizing drives are derailed with impunity. And the aforementioned success stories are the exception rather than the rule.

The point is simply that the region's labor markets, and their regulatory institutions, are in flux. Local activists, their foreign associates, and in a number of important cases heroic—if embattled—labor inspectors are making a difference, and they have the potential to make more substantial contributions in the years ahead.

What would a “high road” strategy look like? Our interviews underscore the International Labour Organization's contributions to the ethos and practice of labor inspection throughout Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean and suggest that a fortified ILO could help build upon recent achievements by self-consciously linking compliance to competitiveness and thereby disseminating best practices across the region.

Ironically, however, the ILO has responded to recent criticisms by channeling resources *away* from labor inspection and into other activities—a move which we think demands reevaluation given the situation on the ground in Latin America.

We must, however, be realistic. Labor history and industrial sociology teach us that despotic industrial relations regimes are not transformed into models of workplace and social democracy from morning to night. And undue pessimism is therefore at least as dangerous as naïve complacency. We know less about the labor inspectors who are regulating Latin American labor markets today than about their progenitors in 19th century Europe. We would do well to correct the imbalance.

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