Bush administration begins to privatize the skies

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The Bush administration's quest to privatize virtually everything will pay huge dividends for the American military contractor Lockheed Martin this year. In February, the giant company was awarded a $1.9 billion contract to assume control of an important function of the US aviation system. Some 2,000 air traffic specialists will lose their jobs in October when the company takes over a function that has been performed by the public sector for half a century.

These workers should not be confused with those who staff the towers at airports across the country and control the flow of aircraft in and out of airports. Air traffic specialists—highly-trained men and women with years of experience—comprise a different layer of the workers who assist an estimated 550,000 non-commercial pilots.

Since the 1950s, air traffic specialists have handled preflight weather briefings for pilots of small aircraft. They are not meteorologists, although by virtue of their training and, in many instances, years of work in one location that familiarizes them with the nuances of a region's topography and climate, they are highly skilled at interpreting weather patterns for aviators. They also can play a crucial role in search-and-rescue operations for missing aircraft. In general, they are a pilot's advocate on the ground, a link to invaluable data.

Operating under the jurisdiction of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), there once were more than 350 automated flight service stations in the United States. During the 1980s, under former President Reagan, that figure dropped to fewer than 60. Under the five-year, $1.9 billion contract awarded to Lockheed Martin this year, 38 more flight stations are expected to close. According to media reports, it is the largest outsourcing project ever undertaken by the federal government.

The origins of the Bush administration's gift to Lockheed Martin, one of the world's largest weapons producers, predate his presidency. Among the right-wing free market advocates who assisted in his 2000 election campaign was Robert Poole, a member of the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation, a think tank that, according to its web site, promotes "choice, competition and a dynamic market economy as the foundation for human dignity and progress."

In his capacity as the Reason Foundation's transportation studies director, Poole was the author of a document entitled, "How to Commercialize Air Traffic Control"—a logical next step, from the perspective of "free market" advocates, to follow the deregulation of the airline industry.

Poole was instrumental in crafting the Bush campaign's transportation policy in 2000. It did not take long for his white paper to become policy. Executive Order 13624, signed by Bush in June 2002, deleted the phrase, "an inherently government function," from a 2000 Clinton order that was intended to keep the flight centers in the public sector.

Within just a few weeks, the process to contract the jobs out to the private sector was under way. The response of the union, the National Association of Air Traffic Specialists (NAATS), was predictably ineffectual: workers were urged, even as the privatization boulder crashed down the mountain, to "speak out" and write their congressional representatives.

The nearly 2,000 jobs that are expected to be gone within a year will disappear in small groupings, often in small communities where the loss of even a few family-wage jobs is noticeable. A sampling: closure of the Sikorsky Airport in Stratford, Connecticut, means 60

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jobs will be gone; at the station adjacent to the Buffalo Niagara International Airport in New York, 34 jobs; 30 people will be out of work at the station in Grand Forks, North Dakota; at centers at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and Dayton, Ohio, 57 jobs.

"Sixty jobs represents a significant payroll for this area," Connecticut State Sen. Bill Finch, a Bridgeport Democrat, told the *Fairfield County Business Journal*. "They are being transferred to a company that has no experience in this whatsoever."

Some lawmakers have introduced legislation intended to prevent the closures of some stations, although it is likely to have all the force of stones flung at Goliath's feet.

Rep. Bernie Sanders of Vermont has introduced House Resolution 1474, the Federal Aviation Safety Security Act. About 50 co-sponsors have joined the effort, including South Dakota Republican John Thune and Democrat Tim Johnson.

In a prepared statement, Sanders said: "We should not privatize federal jobs involving public safety to private sector companies involved in operating for profit. The public safety of airline passengers should not be put up for sale to the lowest bidder."

Meanwhile, NAATS has filed suit against the FAA in US District Court in Washington DC in an effort to halt the outsourcing. Basically, the suit alleges age discrimination: the union says that 92 percent of the workers are 40 or older and eligible for retirement.

Federal regulations dictate that flight specialists must be 30 years of age or older when they are hired. So by design, NAATS President Kate Breen maintains, the older and more experienced workers will be forced out when Lockheed takes over.

"They are taking older, experienced employees and showing them the door," she said.

A recent exchange between Breen and Stephen W. Brinch, Lockheed's Vice President of Human Resources, suggests that an all-out assault on NAATS is in the offing. In April, Breen wrote to Lockheed executive Daniel J. Courain to "request" recognition by the company. The first paragraph of the union leader's letter, dated April 26 and available on the union's web site, includes the following sentence:

"Despite recent disparaging claims by representatives of your organization that 'NAATS is done October 1,' and that 'NAATS is toast,' all discussions over terms and conditions of employment with our members must still go through the Union and may not take place directly with the employees."

Responding on Courain's behalf, Brinch's reply, dated May 10, is blunt: essentially, he says that because the NAATS bid on the contract itself and because the union is trying to overturn the award enjoyed by Lockheed Martin, the "conflict of interest on the part of the NAATS" would make any discussion "improper."

"I cannot agree to hold any discussions with you at this time because of the pending award contest," Brinch wrote. "I will contact you at an appropriate time in the event it becomes necessary to have further communication."

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