

24 years after PATCO strike

US: dispute over air traffic control staffing

Alan Whyte
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Nearly a quarter century after the administration of Ronald Reagan fired nearly 10,000 striking air traffic controllers, inaugurating a nationwide wave of union-busting, the dispute over staffing levels that led to the strike is once again erupting in US control towers.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) released a 55-page report on June 2 alleging that air traffic controllers at a key New York City area facility are deliberately manipulating work schedules to earn excessive overtime. The document further insists that there is neither a shortage of controllers nor any problem with operational safety in the area.

A 35-member team was sent to monitor the 225 controllers working at the Terminal Radar Approach Control center (TRACON) in Westbury, New York, over a period of 60 days. They concluded in their report that the FAA has spent about \$4 million in unnecessary air traffic control overtime at the facility, which guides planes in and out of the New York area's three major airports.

The report cites instances in which controllers are on scheduled vacation and, although there is a substitute who is being paid overtime to replace them, come to work instead of vacationing, thereby forcing the agency to pay two workers. Management makes the same complaint about workers who call in sick and, after substitutes come in on overtime, report to work, also forcing management to pay two workers.

The union's local president, Dean Iacopelli, said that the contract allows vacationing controllers to come into work without notifying management in advance, and also said that none of the workers have been accused of abusing their sick time, although the contract allows such charges to be brought.

The report accuses workers of intimidating and disrespecting managers at the New York TRACON. It

also asserts that the controllers use excessive profanity in the control room.

The report is the latest salvo in the protracted dispute between the agency and its workers over staffing levels, overtime and safety. Earlier this year, when managers attempted to restrict overtime, controllers anonymously reported "operational errors" in which planes were directed to fly too close to each other.

One controller was fired in March for engaging in an altercation in the control room while complaining it was short-staffed. Iacopelli himself was denounced in the report for publicly criticizing a supervisor over short staffing, thereby creating a threat to air safety.

While the report maintains that there is no staffing problem at the facility, its workforce has since dropped to only 210 controllers, down from about 240 last summer. The agency and the union agreed years ago that the facilities needed 270 controllers to operate safely.

Shortly after the report was published, John Carr, national president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), held a news conference to condemn the report's attempt to scapegoat the controllers for the agency's staffing and safety problems.

He began by pointing out that while air traffic in the New York area is up 5 percent this year compared to last, the TRACON center is operating with only 76 percent of its authorized staffing level. "Air traffic controllers at the New York TRACON work mandatory six-day workweeks and, in fact, in the report it even mentions controllers being tasked with working overtime 51 of an available 52 weeks," he said. "It's completely disingenuous for the FAA to short-staff the facility, demand a six-day workweek out of the workforce and then complain about the cost of the

overtime. Operational errors in the facility are up, and the FAA themselves are forecasting air traffic in the New York area is going to rise.”

Carr also disputed the investigators’ claim that 147 operational errors they recorded did not pose a serious risk to safety. He asked how something could be called an operational error if it did not entail a safety risk.

He also rejected the report’s contention that controllers work only three hours and 39 minutes a day, one of the lowest rates for any large facility. He called the agency’s productivity statistics “useless,” explaining that the New York TRACON is unique in that it covers three major airports—Kennedy, La Guardia and Newark Liberty International, as well as a number of smaller airports in the region.

NATCA represents about 15,000 controllers, engineers and other airline workers throughout the United States. The national contract with the union expires this August. The FAA has already claimed it lacks the funding to meet the union’s demands. President Bush and Congress have cut the agency’s budget by \$200 million this year.

Despite the report’s claim about adequate staffing, most independent observers recognize that there is a desperate need to train new personnel. This is because nearly three quarters of the almost 15,000 controllers nationwide will be eligible to retire in the next nine years.

The bulk of this workforce was hired after Reagan fired more than 11,000 air traffic controllers who joined the strike called by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981. Employees are able to retire after 25 years of service. Without a major influx of new controllers, the national air traffic control system is headed for a major crisis.

In addition to echoing the bitter dispute between PATCO and the FAA 24 years ago, the government’s rejection of the need for increased staffing and its slashing of the agency’s funds represent a damning indictment of the Bush administration. Behind the incessant warnings about terrorist attacks, the real policy is one of gross indifference to air traffic safety.



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