

25 years since PATCO

US air traffic controllers face renewed assault

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As the 25th anniversary of the Reagan administration's August 1981 firing of 12,000 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) passes, the US government is again in the process of imposing drastic concessions on the backs those manning the control towers at US airports.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is threatening to begin implementing the full terms of a new agreement it imposed in June following the breakdown of negotiations with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA). The new agreement calls for drastic cuts in pay and benefits for the 14,000 controllers.

The FAA terms call for changes in classifications that could result in pay cuts of as much as 30 percent for new controllers. The contract also changes work rules which will result in controllers working longer hours for the same or less pay.

The FAA has halted transfers by air traffic controllers from smaller control facilities to larger operations called Terminal Radar Approach Control centers (TRACON). Under the previous agreement if a controller moved from a smaller, low-volume facility to one that handles more flights they would have been eligible for a significant pay increase. The FAA wants to change the rules to force controllers who transfer to start near the bottom of the pay scale.

Chronic short-staffing, the complaint that provoked the historic showdown with the Reagan administration, has emerged once again as a central issue. The FAA, for its part, claims that controllers are abusing overtime.

The FAA recently imposed changes in work rules at seven of its largest TRACONs. The changes have resulted in controllers being forced to work longer

hours without breaks. The new rules bar supervisors from scheduling extra rest periods for controllers who handle exceptionally difficult assignments. According to a union representative in New York, "It used to be an hour lunch, now its 25 minutes at best." He added, "and a half hour break is now 20 minutes at best."

The changes contribute nothing to safety or efficiency, but if anything have undermined safety by increasing stress levels. The creation of intolerable conditions in the towers appears to be a strategy aimed at driving senior, higher paid, controllers into early retirement so that they can be replaced with new hires earning substantially lower pay and benefits.

Due to high levels of stress associated with the job, air traffic controllers face mandatory retirement at age 56. Controllers can have more than two dozen planes at one time on their radar screens and must be able to make quick, life or death decisions. FAA rules require new controllers to be under age 31.

The FAA is seeking some \$2 billion in concessions under terms of its imposed contract. Contract negotiations, which dragged on from July 2005 to April 2006, were little more than a farce. The FAA refused to reduce its demands by so much as a dime, while the NATCA leadership retreated further and further, ultimately offering concessions totaling \$1.4 billion.

The previous agreement, signed in 2003, increased the number of air traffic controllers whose pay would be tied to performance, including on-time arrivals. The FAA and Congress rejected demands for increased hiring to cover heavier workloads.

The union charges that the FAA demands are aimed at paving the way for the privatization of the air traffic control system. Steps in this direction have already begun. In 2005 the Bush administration handed Lockheed Martin a \$1.9 billion contract to run

automated flight service stations that handle weather briefings for pilots. The privatization led to a wholesale closure of flight centers and the wiping out of some 2,000 jobs. In June of this year the National Association of Air Traffic Specialists (NAATS) lost a union decertification election. Lockheed Martin had refused to recognize NAATS, despite an existing contract with the FAA.

In the face of these attacks the strategy of both the NAATS and NATCA has been to lobby Congress to intervene.

The growing frustration of air traffic controllers with their union's policies was reflected in the recent election of Pat Forrey to head NATCA. He replaces John Carr, who had held the post for the previous six years. Forrey, however, has indicated that he will continue in the same path as his predecessor.



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