

25 years since the PATCO strike: A historical turning point in the class struggle

Barry Grey
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On this day 25 years ago, August 3, 1981, 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike in a contract dispute with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to demand shorter hours, increased staffing and improved wages. The same day, President Ronald Reagan went on national television, speaking from the White House Rose Garden, to denounce the strikers and issue an ultimatum: either they returned to work within 48 hours or they would be summarily fired and permanently banned from federal employment.

Two days later, on the basis of an obscure and previously unenforced 1955 law banning strikes by government unions, Reagan fired all 11,359 controllers who had defied his back-to-work order. Thus began a massive government union-busting operation that ended with the permanent dismissal and blacklisting of the workers, the seizure of PATCO's finances, and the decertification of the union.

It included the spectacle of PATCO leaders being led to jail in shackles and FBI agents and federal marshals converging on the picket lines. Four PATCO members were jailed by the federal government in the spring and summer of 1983 for participating in the strike. Ron May, Gary Greene and Lee Grant were leaders of PATCO in the Dallas-Ft. Worth region. Along with Dick Hoover in Houston, they were singled out by the Reagan administration for their militant role in the strike, convicted on felony charges of striking against the government, imprisoned, fined and permanently stripped of their civil rights.

The government vendetta against PATCO has never ended. To this day, the ban on the rehiring of PATCO strikers, imposed by Reagan and a Democratic-controlled Congress, remains essentially intact. President Clinton officially lifted the ban in 1993, but this was a token gesture. To date, only 846 PATCO controllers, out of more than 11,000 fired by Reagan, have been allowed to return to their profession.

Then and now, the cold-blooded persecution of the PATCO workers has exposed the reality of class warfare and the role of the capitalist state as the repressive arm of the ruling elite in so-called democratic America. In the aftermath of two world wars, American imperialism never exhibited such vengeful spite toward its imperialist rivals as it has toward the PATCO strikers, and the American working class as a whole.

The smashing of PATCO marked a turning point in class relations both in the US and internationally. It signaled the definitive end of the policies of liberal reformism and relative class compromise that had predominated in the post-World War II period and the onset of a ruthless capitalist offensive against the working class that continues to this day.

It also foreshadowed the collapse of the American trade unions and all of the old, bureaucratized labor organizations and parties internationally, which were based on nationalism and class compromise. Reagan's assault on the PATCO strikers—an attack without precedent in modern US history—provoked massive opposition among working people both in the US and around the world. One month after Reagan fired the PATCO strikers, more than 500,000 workers converged on Washington, DC, in a "Solidarity Day" demonstration—the largest protest ever in the US—to

express their outrage and opposition to the Reagan administration.

But the official unions—the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters, etc.—systematically worked to isolate the PATCO strikers and ensure their defeat. The response of the AFL-CIO to Reagan's ultimatum to the PATCO strikers was to order union pilots, machinists and flight attendants to cross the picket lines and report to work.

For the crisis-ridden American ruling elite, the successful prosecution of this attack on the working class was unthinkable without the firmest assurance of support and collaboration from the union officialdom. This the labor bureaucrats readily granted.

This conspiracy of the ruling class and the labor leadership against the working class was forged well in advance of the PATCO strike. Already, in the New York City crisis of 1975, the Chrysler bailout under the Democratic Carter administration in 1979-1980, and the defeat of the New York City transit workers' strike against a Democratic city administration in 1980, the trade union bureaucracy had agreed that the working class would have to pay for the crisis of American capitalism.

The labor bureaucrats supported the closure of factories and mass layoffs in auto and other industries, and used the threat of unemployment to impose pay cuts and other concessions against the resistance of the working class. At the same time, they tacitly accepted the destruction of social welfare programs, which was begun under Carter and intensified under Reagan.

To systematically drive back the living standards of the working class and carry through the destruction of its past gains, however, the ruling class required a clear and decisive defeat of a section of the labor movement. An example had to be set to intimidate and weaken the working class and, at the same time, embolden private industry to take the road of scab-herding and union-busting.

The union-busting attack on PATCO was the product of a carefully planned provocation against the working class, carried out with the full complicity of the trade union bureaucracy. Reagan refrained from intervening against the miners' strike earlier in 1981, and deliberately targeted PATCO, a small union of professional federal employees, for destruction.

So confident was Reagan of the collaboration of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy in his assault on PATCO, he went on television to announce his back-to-work ultimatum while the AFL-CIO Executive Council was meeting in Chicago. Then-United Auto Workers President Douglas Fraser vented the real feelings of the assembled union presidents when he denounced the strike and said it "could do massive damage to the labor movement."

The defeat of PATCO was the signal for a wave of union-busting, wage-cutting and mass layoffs carried out by big business in every sector of the American economy. Once again, the fierce resistance of workers in auto, steel, the mines, the airlines, meatpacking, transport and other industries was sabotaged by the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions. The result was a vast decline in the social position of the working class, the destruction of

gains won in previous decades of struggle, and an immense growth of social inequality.

The consolidation of the financial oligarchy that dominates every aspect of American society and plunders the social wealth to increase its already staggering personal wealth is directly bound up with the betrayal of the PATCO strike and the struggles that followed. These betrayals set the stage for the intensified attack on jobs and living standards that is now under way, with General Motors and Ford slashing tens of thousands of jobs and gutting health and retirement benefits, and the auto parts maker Delphi demanding wage cuts of 60 percent.

As for the unions, they have undergone a collapse in membership—private sector unionization is at 7.8 percent, the lowest level since 1901—while being transformed by the union bureaucracy into virtual extensions of corporate management.

Already, 25 years ago, the betrayal of the PATCO strike provided a historical verdict on the viability of a labor movement based on hostility to socialism, defense of the profit system and nationalism. It demonstrated the anti-working class essence of the trade union leadership's support for the two-party system, maintained chiefly through its alliance with the Democrats, and the necessity for the building of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

On August 13, 1981, just 10 days into the PATCO strike, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, published a statement by its political committee in the party's newspaper, the *Bulletin*. Entitled "The PATCO Strike: A Warning to the Working Class," this statement presented an analysis of the strike, its historical significance and its political implications that has been thoroughly vindicated by subsequent developments.

We present below excerpts from that statement.

"The strike by 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization is a historical turning point for the struggle of the working class in the United States and internationally. It is the first major political confrontation between the American working class and the government.

"After decades in which the class struggle in America was either denied entirely or minimized, in which the American workers was depicted as having become the middle class, in which America was held up as the great exception in a world in revolutionary ferment, the PATCO strike has exploded all these myths.

"The air controllers' strike has demonstrated that underneath the appearance of political stability and conservatism, the most insoluble social and economic contradictions of any capitalist country have been building up....

"The ferocity of the Reagan administration attack reveals the real state of class relations in the United States. Far from being the exception to the laws of the class struggle, the United States is becoming the most extreme example of the inevitable working out of these laws. And now that the open struggle between the working class and the capitalist state is under way, it must develop, as Trotsky described it, 'at an American speed'—that is, explosively.

"The strike has already had an enormous impact on the consciousness of millions of workers in the United States and internationally. Within a week, 15,000 members of a little known civil service union, founded only a dozen years ago, have produced the greatest domestic crisis in the United States.

"The chauvinist and anticommunist demagogy of the trade union bureaucracy is being subjected to a shattering exposure. The air traffic controllers have demonstrated in practice that the ally of the American working class is the international working class. Air traffic controllers speaking a dozen languages have given tangible support to the strike, while 'red-blooded American' union leaders act as agents of the capitalist

government to isolate and break PATCO.

"At the same time, the mask of democracy and government 'of the people, by the people and for the people' is being stripped off, and the capitalist state is revealing itself for what it is: an instrument of oppression of the masses in the interests of a tiny handful of billionaires.

"Workers are thrown in jail, bound hand and foot with chains; their union is decertified for doing what 95 percent of the members voted to do; punitive fines have been levied aimed at confiscating all the assets of the union and handing them over to the government or the airlines; FBI agents and federal marshals monitor picket lines and visit workers in their homes to intimidate them and their families.

"One political conclusion above all must be drawn from the PATCO strike: far from being an aberration or exception, it reveals the real essence of class relations in the United States.

"The ruling class is attacking all the basic rights of workers—social services, jobs, safety regulations, living standards, and now the right to union organization—and calling upon the repressive powers and violence of the capitalist state to enforce these attacks.

"The ruling class relies on the trade union bureaucrats to sabotage the fight of the working class against the government. This sabotage takes the form, not only of open strikebreaking as in the air traffic controllers' struggle, but most of all keeping the working class politically disenfranchised by supporting the capitalist two-party system....

"The source of Reagan's policies lies in the economic crisis of American and world capitalism. The strike began just two weeks before the 10th anniversary of the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreement on August 15, 1971. On that date, the Nixon administration was forced to end the convertibility of the dollar into gold. This set the stage for the disintegration of the whole structure of post-war boom upon which the high living standards and class compromise within the United States were based....

"In the 1970s, the international crisis of US imperialism predominated. But in the 1980s, the full impact of this crisis is hitting home, within the borders of the United States. The artificial separation between the international crisis and domestic policy has been broken down, and all the methods employed by the ruling class internationally are now being brought into the United States.

"This is the significance of the installation of the Reagan administration. It is the embodiment of the counterrevolutionary policies of US capitalism. In little more than six months, it has set out to wipe out all of the gains of the working class since 1932. Basic social services are being slashed or eliminated. Regulations that protect workers or the public as a whole from unrestrained capitalist exploitation are being scrapped. Tight money policies with interest rates over 20 percent are aimed at wiping out unprofitable sections of industry and creating an army of tens of millions of unemployed to drive down wages. While consumers, the cities and unprofitable industries are being starved for cash, tens of billions are being made available for the biggest corporate mergers in history, as the most powerful corporate interests reorganize industry to make profit at depression levels of production.

"This was outlined in a recent issue of *BusinessWeek*, which said, 'the survival of America's basic industries now depends on shrinking down to the efficient and competitive core.'

"It is this very policy that is being applied to the airline industry. This began with the deregulation of the airlines under the Carter administration (the leading proponent was the liberal Democrat and so-called 'friend of labor' Senator Edward Kennedy)....

"The determined stand of the air traffic controllers has come into direct conflict with this Chrysler-like assault on airline workers.... It is clear that considerably before the strike, both the airlines and the government decided that it was time to take on and smash PATCO, as a center of resistance to their drive for profit.

“The plans for massive strikebreaking and the firing of the work force were drawn up beginning in January 1980, under the Carter administration. Langhorne Bond, Carter’s choice to head the FAA, was responsible for the plan that was put into effect by the Reagan administration.

“The strike was deliberately provoked, as the administration blatantly reneged on a campaign promise to consider PATCO’s position on shorter hours and safety, put \$40 million on the table, and then refused to budge....

“The provocation of the strike thus emerges as a state conspiracy to destroy jobs and wipe out the union, backed to the hilt by the airlines, who are carrying out the same policies, and have used Reagan’s attacks to justify further attacks on their own workers.

“The PATCO strike has brought out in the open for every worker to see the enormous crisis produced in the labor movement by the election of Reagan.

“The Carter administration was bankrupt because of the bankruptcy of liberalism, brought on by the economic crisis. But the AFL-CIO bureaucracy had nothing to advance as an alternative, leaving the field open for Reagan and his right-wing rampage.

“Now Reagan is carrying through the vicious anti-working class policies demanded by Wall Street, and the bureaucracy is paralyzed as all its Democratic Party ‘friends’ in Congress endorse what AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland described as Reagan’s ‘radical counterrevolution.’

“For six months the AFL-CIO leaders have refused to mobilize the independent strength of the working class and told workers to rely on the Democrats. The essence of the AFL-CIO leadership is that they are agents of the Democratic Party and the capitalist class inside the labor movement.... They cannot fight Reagan because they accept the need to defend the profit system, and what Reagan is doing is necessary for capitalism. This is proven by the fact that both capitalist parties support Reagan’s policies virtually unanimously....

“The AFL-CIO leadership fears the political implications of any mass movement against Reagan. It has no alternative to him. To mobilize labor behind PATCO means raising the issue of a political alternative to both the Republicans and Democrats....

“The refusal of the labor bureaucracy to defend PATCO against the ‘fascist methods’ of Reagan is a warning to the entire working class. Despite its great power, the working class can’t mobilize its strength against Reaganism without the establishment of its political independence from the Democratic Party. It must break with the Democrats.

“This break with the Democrats is not just a question of organizational separation. It means a break from the policy of defense of the capitalist system. The central issue is that the American working class must be mobilized around a socialist policy to resolve the crisis.... Capitalism must be destroyed, and this means the establishment of workers’ power and a planned economy.”



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