

“Sleeping on the job” scandal reveals exploitation of US air traffic controllers

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The scandal over air traffic controllers falling asleep on the job illustrates the dangerous conditions at US airports almost 30 years after Pres. Ronald Reagan crushed the strike by PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization), which workers waged to preserve safety and working conditions. The scandal has revealed that major airports today rely on single controllers to direct traffic in overnight shifts.

In response, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) chief Hank Krakowski on Thursday submitted his resignation, and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced that 27 airports would receive an additional overnight air traffic controller.

Shortly after midnight on March 23, American Airlines flight 1012 from Miami and United Airlines flight 628 from Chicago each requested permission to land at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, which handles some 18 million passengers per year and is located near high priority national security sites including the White House, the Capitol building and the Pentagon. After repeated attempts to signal the control tower, the flights were forced to land unassisted. No one was hurt among the some 165 passengers and crew on the two flights.

It has since come to light that there were four known incidents of lone air traffic controllers sleeping on the job in 2010. This week air traffic controllers were found asleep at airports in Knoxville, Tennessee; Reno, Nevada; and Seattle, Washington.

Predictably, politicians and the media have attacked the air traffic controllers. Those found sleeping have been suspended, and the FAA is seeking to fire the Knoxville controller.

President Obama joined in the scapegoating, telling ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, “The individuals who are falling asleep on the job, that’s unacceptable. The fact is, when you’re responsible for the lives and

safety of people up in the air, you better do your job. So, there’s an element of individual responsibility that has to be dealt with.”

In fact, Obama and both major parties bear the responsibility for failing to adequately fund air traffic safety. At least 31 major airports staff only one controller on overnight shifts. The FAA has not released the names of these airports, but they include Richmond International Airport, San Diego International Airport, and Sacramento International Airport.

In early 2008 there were 11,000 FAA air traffic controllers in the US—the same number as worked in the industry at the time of the PATCO strike. The consequences of this severe understaffing were tragically revealed in 2006 in Lexington, Kentucky, when a Comair Flight crashed after attempting to take off from the wrong runway, killing all 47 passengers and two of the three-member crew. After correctly giving the plane its runway assignment, the lone air traffic controller on duty had proceeded to other tasks, as required by FAA protocol.

In another recent episode, a five-foot hole ripped open in the roof of a Southwest Airline Boeing 737 carrying terrified passengers from Phoenix to Sacramento. The gaping hole resulted from years of wear and tear, and should have been detected through rigorous inspections. But these do not take place. The FAA has only 1,100 inspectors to look after 625,000 pilots, 5,200 repair stations and 81 airlines.

The FAA budget is about to be cut again, but the only question is by how much. House Republicans have passed a bill rolling back funding to 2008 levels, while Senate Democrats have pushed through a bill that would keep funding stagnant. If recent short-term budget negotiations are an indication, the final bill will hew much more closely to Republican demands.

Like everything else in the US, air safety is subordinated to cost. That dozens of major airports across

the US rely on a single air traffic controller for overnight “graveyard” shifts raises deeply troubling questions. What if this lone controller becomes physically incapacitated? What happens if an emergency arises in which one airplane must receive the full attention of the lone air traffic controller?

There is abundant evidence to suggest that sleeping on the job is the inevitable outcome of working conditions imposed on air traffic controllers.

A study by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) four years ago found that 61 percent of air traffic controllers had work schedules that “opposed normal sleep-wake patterns,” Bloomberg reports. “A schedule may look like this, the NTSB said then: The first day, a 3 p.m. shift start; the second day, a 2 p.m. start; the third day, 7 a.m.; the fourth day, 6 a.m. The worker may return to work a fifth shift at 10 p.m. on the fourth day to get a longer weekend, the board said.” Many air traffic controllers have only eight hours off between shifts, which leaves only a few hours for sleeping.

It is currently forbidden for air traffic controllers to sleep even on their breaks, a practice that is allowed and even encouraged in Germany, Australia, Canada, France and elsewhere. Germany actually provides rooms with cots. In the US, when two air traffic controllers work on the same night shift they oftentimes take turns napping, even though this could result in their firing.

Scientists have found that nightshift workers perform better and more safely when allowed to nap on breaks.

“Sleep scientists long have known that fatigue affects human behavior much like alcohol, slowing reaction times and eroding judgment. People suffering from fatigue sometimes focus on a single task while ignoring other, more urgent needs,” writes Jane Lowry of the Associated Press. “The level of fatigue created by several of the shift schedules worked by 70 percent of the FAA’s 15,700 controllers can have an impact on behavior equivalent to a blood-alcohol level of .04 ... half the legal driving limit of .08.”

She continues, “More than two decades ago, NASA scientists concluded that airline pilots were more alert and performed better during landings when they were allowed to take turns napping during the cruise phase of flights. The FAA chose to ignore recommendations that US pilots be allowed ‘controlled napping.’”

Traveler advocacy groups have criticized understaffing and the denial of sleep to air traffic controllers.

“It’s not outrageous to have people in a safety job rest on duty,” said Bill Voss, president of the Flight Safety

Foundation. “What is crazy is putting two people onto a shift in a dark room with no noise and telling them to stare out a window and do nothing for eight hours, but to never fall asleep.”

“It shouldn’t be any surprise that any of these people are nodding off,” said Kevin Mitchell of the Business Travel Coalition. “Why hasn’t the FAA been listening to the air traffic controllers union for the last 20 years?”

The better question is, why has the air traffic controllers union been unable to protect the working conditions of its members, which correspond to the safety conditions of the flying public?

That question can only be addressed in light of the Reagan administration’s crushing of the PATCO strike in 1981. When air traffic controllers went out on strike that year to defend their working conditions, Reagan fired them, union leaders were arrested, workers were blacklisted and witch-hunted, and PATCO itself was decertified.

In spite of strong support for PATCO in the working class—including a demonstration of some 500,000 in Washington DC—the AFL-CIO consciously isolated the flight controllers’ struggle and worked to defeat it, a defeat that set the stage for what has proved to be a three-decade-long assault on the jobs and wages of workers in every industry.

The union that replaced PATCO in the airline industry, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), was an organization created and controlled by strikebreakers, handpicked by the Reagan administration, that from its inception promised it would never carry out an “illegal” strike as PATCO had—in other words, it would never authorize a strike at all. Nothing good for workers could be built on these rotten foundations.



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