Robert Poli, blacklisted leader of PATCO union, dies at 78

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Robert Poli, president of the PATCO union of air traffic controllers when its 1981 strike was outlawed and crushed by the Reagan administration with the connivance of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, died of kidney and liver failure at his home in Meridian, Idaho on September 15. He was 78.

On August 3, 1981, over 15,000 PATCO members went out on strike against the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Within hours President Ronald Reagan issued an ultimatum: either the controllers return to work within 48 hours, without negotiation, or face summary firing under the Taft-Hartley Act.

Some 12,500 controllers, led by Poli, refused to budge. "This is total intimidation," Poli said. "All it's doing is making our people tougher. We are going to stay on strike as long as it takes." The controllers waged a struggle that lasted months and won broad working-class support, best exemplified by the 500,000-strong Solidarity Day march in Washington on September 19, 1981.

But the AFL-CIO worked to isolate and defeat PATCO—setting a pattern that would continue throughout the 1980s. Affiliated air industry unions ordered members to cross picket lines, and the union bureaucracy refused to countenance sympathy actions, much less accede to the widespread demand for a general strike.

The unions opposed "anything that would represent punishing, injuring or inconveniencing the public at large," declared AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland. "It's easy to be a midnight gin militant and call for a general strike, but if you're a responsible leader you have to appraise the consequences," he said on another occasion.

By the end of the year PATCO was outlawed, and Poli had stepped down as president in the desperate hope that it would create an avenue for negotiation. This did not happen. Militant members were imprisoned, the courts imposed such massive fines—over $40 million—that the union was bankrupted, and all strikers were blacklisted. The ban remained in effect until 1993.

Poli himself never again worked in his trade, instead finding employment in car sales and real estate before his retirement. He stayed away from reunions of the blacklisted controllers and avoided discussing the strike publicly. "He would not talk to me," said historian Joseph McCartin, the author of a recent liberal interpretation of the strike. "He's the one person who really did not want to talk."

Poli bears little personal responsibility for one of the most crushing defeats in the history of the American working class. By most accounts he was earnestly dedicated to the air traffic controllers he represented. Some of the fighting traditions of the American working class lived in Poli: he was personally courageous, waged the strike under the old solidarity principle "an injury to one is an injury to all," and was ready to use militant tactics to achieve job aims.

"Oh, certainly, I'll go to jail," Poli said on the strike's first day. "I'll carry this through to the fullest." One contemporary report called him "an imposing man, carrying 235 pounds on his 6-foot-2 frame. . . He speaks softly but firmly, his words calm and rational but his tone carrying the conviction of a religious leader."

Unlike union officials today, Poli was a worker who had risen in the union ranks based on the respect he won among fellow workers. Born in 1936 in Pittsburgh, he worked for years in his trade, which he first learned, like many members of PATCO, in the Air Force. From the early 1960s he worked as a controller in Pittsburgh and Cleveland while holding various elected offices in the union. He came to Washington DC in 1972 when he became a full-time official of the organization.

In 1980 Poli was selected as president of PATCO because members viewed him to be more militant than the incumbent, John Leyden. Air traffic controllers were ready for a fight. Over the previous decade employment levels and safety measures had failed to keep up with increasing commercial air traffic. Extreme stress forced a majority of controllers into early retirement. Poli once said that 89 percent of controllers never even made it to retirement because job stress and related illnesses, including alcoholism, led to early death. PATCO workers demanded a shorter workweek, increased wages, and more staffing.

The PATCO union, disappointed in the Carter administration's refusal to negotiate improvements, had made the surprise move of endorsing the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, in the election of 1980. Reagan promised they would be rewarded.

"You can rest assured," Reagan wrote to Poli just before the election, "that if I am elected president, I will take whatever

steps are necessary to provide our air traffic controllers with the most modern equipment available and to adjust staff levels and work days so that they are commensurate with achieving a maximum degree of public safety."

Neither Poli nor the air traffic controllers—and indeed very few within the working class—comprehended the enemy they confronted in 1981. This was not a simple matter of switching endorsements. The controllers faced the power of the capitalist class—its federal government, its courts, its two political parties, and its media propaganda machine—without the backing of the AFL-CIO. Their militancy in strike action was effective, initially causing massive disruption to the nation's air system, but it was not nearly enough.

This was not the fault of the PATCO strikers. Decades of anticommunism, a state religion in all but name, had robbed American workers of their political traditions. They did not understand that the great victories of the 1930s, the building of the mass industrial unions, had been nurtured by socialism and led by socialist-minded militants. They did not understand the role of the Russian Revolution in inspiring these militants and in winning concessions from a fearful ruling class.

Poli and PATCO were taken in by Reagan's promise to consider their issues. But those who criticized PATCO for the Reagan endorsement were covering up their own betrayal. This was especially true of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and its apologists, who claimed the union-busting operation would have been avoided had there been a Democrat in the White House.

In fact, the plan Reagan implemented for smashing PATCO, including the military scabbing operation known as the Management Strike Contingency Force, had been drawn up under Democratic President Carter in 1980. It was Carter's nominee to head the Federal Reserve Board, Paul Volcker, who had precipitated the devastating 1979-1980 recession by sending the benchmark overnight lending rate over 20 percent, creating mass unemployment as a lever to attack the militancy of the working class. "The standard of living of the average American worker has to decline," Volcker declared in 1979. And Democratic governors in the 1980s, from Rudy Perpich in Minnesota to Bruce Babbitt in Arizona, joined hands with the Reagan administration in a nationwide union-busting campaign.

The Workers League, predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party, and the *Bulletin*, the US forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, waged an extensive campaign during the strike, winning significant support among the controllers. The Workers League popularized the call for a general strike against the Reagan administration. It defended imprisoned PATCO workers. And it called for a break from the Democratic Party as the precondition for the political independence of the working class. It was no longer possible in 1981 to conduct even a limited jobs struggle on a pro-capitalist basis under the subordination of the Democratic Party. If the PATCO strike were allowed to be isolated and defeated, the Workers League warned, this would set the stage for an assault on the entire working class.

This warning was prophetic. In the 1980s every major strike was deliberately isolated and betrayed by the union leadership. Corporations and state authorities brought back their old violent methods of class repression: the state militia, company goons, private police, court injunctions, labor frame-ups, and even murder. The unions capitulated, proclaiming the policy of corporatism that put the profitability and competitiveness of "their" companies above the interests of the workers they claimed to represent.

Robert Poli and the PATCO strikers could not have known in 1981 that they straddled the fault line of a major shift in class relations. From the 1930s into the 1970s, in countless militant struggles, American workers had won a series of reforms, rights and improved conditions. Government and industry were compelled to recognize and bargain with unions, and most often it was the bosses, not the workers, who made concessions. Workers saw their rights expanded and wages, conditions and living standards improved. Workers gained the right to a modest retirement, and they came to expect that their children would have a chance for a better life through expanded educational opportunities.

The destruction of PATCO announced a ruling class counteroffensive that continues to this day. All the gains of the 20th century have been dismantled, or are targeted for elimination. Now, in 2014, a new generation of workers has inherited this intolerable situation. They will inevitably be driven into struggle.

Obituaries for Poli in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* hailed the PATCO defeat as the signature victory for Ronald Reagan. A similar article in the *Los Angeles Times* gloated that "[b]y virtually every measure, the PATCO strike was unsuccessful."

There is one measure, though, that the bourgeois commentators do not count on. That is the working class learning from the lessons of that defeat, and the failure of trade unionism as a whole, and turning to a political struggle for socialism.

At Mehring Books: Thirty Years Since the PATCO Strike