

Trump unveils plan to privatize air traffic control system

Patrick Martin
6 June 2017

President Trump and top administration and congressional officials announced the proposed privatization of the US air traffic control system Monday, in the first major event of what the White House has billed as “infrastructure week.”

As the plan to dismantle the Federal Aviation Administration makes clear, the measures to be unveiled during the remainder of the week will have nothing to do with either rebuilding the decayed public infrastructure of the United States or creating jobs.

Instead, the driving force of the administration’s policies in this sphere, as in every other, is the desire to create immense profits for favored corporations and billionaires. In the case of air traffic control, the beneficiaries will be the airline monopolies, as well as whatever corporation acquires the FAA for the asking price of zero.

The name FAA will remain inside the government, as a shrunken agency charged with promoting air travel safety but deprived of any regulatory authority—little more than a propaganda adjunct to the present National Transportation Safety Board.

The actual operations of the FAA will be spun off as a private “nonprofit” corporation which will inevitably come under the control of the airlines or some other giant corporate entity. Some 30,000 federal workers, including all 14,000 air traffic controllers who are vital to the day-to-day functioning of commercial and private aviation, will become employees of the new company.

Trump was typically vague about the details of the plan, only praising it effusively as great and fantastic. In contradiction to his usual “America First” rhetoric, however, Trump pointed to foreign examples as supposedly successful models, including Canada, Australia and several European countries, all of which

have privatized air traffic control in various ways.

The nonprofit entity will acquire not only the workers but also the assets of the FAA, including the \$7 billion NextGen modernization program implemented over several administrations to transition the FAA from ground-based radar monitoring to satellite-based monitoring similar to GPS.

While Trump condemned the modernization program as money wasted, the transition is to take effect by 2020. In effect, this long-term plan will be turned over to private operation just in time for the new efficiencies to be translated into profit opportunities, either for the airlines or the corporate sponsor of the new “nonprofit” entity.

A critical component of the privatization deal is the support of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), the union formed to replace the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) after the Reagan administration smashed the 1981 air traffic controllers strike.

Reagan broke the PATCO strike using a plan drafted under his predecessor, Democrat Jimmy Carter, who had pushed through deregulation of the airlines, the brainchild of the leading liberal Democrat in the US Senate, Edward Kennedy. Former aides to Kennedy devised the strikebreaking plan, using military controllers, that was later put into practice by the Reagan administration.

None of this would have been possible without the backing of the AFL-CIO, which regarded the smashing of the PATCO strike and the destruction of PATCO as a necessary step in suppressing working class opposition to the ultra-right program of the Reagan administration. PATCO became the template for a decade-long effort to strangle strikes and crush militancy within the union rank-and-file, which led

ultimately to the transformation of the unions into organizations completely committed to the defense of corporate profit, with the union officials serving as an industrial police force, a second line of management.

NATCA has long played that role, opposing any industrial action by air traffic controllers, and collaborating with FAA officials, whether appointed by Republicans or Democrats, so long as the union's "right" to collect dues from a captive work force was retained.

In the privatization deal, there is even a sweetener for the union officials: two of the 13 spots on the board of directors of the new nonprofit company are reserved for them. They will be joined by two representatives of the airlines, one from general aviation, one from airport authorities, and two from the federal government. These eight, along with the CEO, will select four more "independent" members.

The makeup of the board is the main difference between the Trump plan and one introduced last year by Bill Shuster, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The changes were in response to complaints by general aviation (small plane owners, invariably wealthy) and elected officials in rural areas that the board would be dominated by the major airlines.

The White House plan declares that the new entity "should honor existing labor agreements," and provides that current employees would keep their federal retirement and healthcare benefits, further nods to the NATCA union. New hires would be able to join the union but would not be guaranteed the same benefits and conditions—in effect, an open door to a two-tier system like that imposed on the auto industry by the Obama administration.

There continues to be opposition from rural and small-town interests, since the new private entity would make decisions about awarding routes, which are likely to favor the concerns of commercial airlines anxious to dump unprofitable low-volume routes.

The plan also displays the utter cynicism of the Trump White House, in which officials lie without shame or even any serious attempt to keep the lies straight. Thus Trump, at the official unveiling Monday, declared that the NextGen system was a disaster, in which the Obama administration spent "\$7 billion dollars trying to upgrade the system and totally failed,

they didn't know what the hell they were doing."

At a press briefing two days earlier, Gary Cohn, director of Trump's National Economic Council, praised NextGen and said privatization would be based on it: "We will be speeding up the implementation of NextGen air traffic control, going from a land-based radar system to a much more accurate and precise GPS-based system. We're really moving into the modern decade of technology and aircraft control."

It remains to be seen whether the legislation to privatize the FAA can be rammed through in the limited time available, since the current FAA authorization expires September 30, along with the Fiscal Year 2017 budget. The plan faces nominal opposition from Democrats, especially in the Senate, but the real danger comes from small-town and rural interests with influence in the Republican Party.

Two influential general aviation groups, the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) and the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, opposed the Trump plan, with the NBAA denouncing the overhaul as "really about the airlines' push to gain more control over our air traffic control system, so that they can run it for their own benefit, and is a sideshow to a serious and constructive discussion about building on the progress currently underway on NextGen."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact