

As air traffic controllers call in sick

Air traffic grinds to a halt in the Eastern US

Dan de Vries and Sandy English
26 January 2019

A shortage of air traffic controllers on Friday morning at airports on the East Coast of the United States, but particularly in Washington, D. C., and Florida, caused the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to substantially slow air traffic throughout the region, the most populous part of the US.

According to media reports, “Arriving flights from Newark International and Philadelphia International airports were being delayed by an average of 41 minutes at one point. Later, LaGuardia released a statement saying, ‘Due to staffing shortages at FAA air traffic control centers along the East Coast, there are major delays at LGA.’”

At about 9:00 a.m Eastern Standard Time on Friday, the FAA suspended air arrivals into LaGuardia altogether and issued a statement that read, in part: “We have experienced a slight increase in sick leave at two facilities. We are mitigating the impact by augmenting staffing, rerouting traffic and increasing spacing between aircraft as needed.”

Air traffic controllers are among the 500,000 federal employees who have been obliged to work without pay for 35 days. Some 300,000 others were furloughed, also without pay. Many of these workers, who have now missed two paychecks, were unable to work because of the stress and fatigue of second and third jobs they have been forced to take to make ends meet.

Flights were significantly delayed at Orlando, Florida and Newark, New Jersey, as well as Boston. While the traffic ban at LaGuardia, known as a ground stop, was lifted after 90 minutes, long delays remained for travelers at the airport, which was already overburdened by the general decay of transportation infrastructure in New York. Delays averaged an hour-and-a-half.

The FAA’s bland announcement concealed a rapidly

developing crisis. Anger has reached a boiling point among hundreds of the thousands of federal workers unable to pay their bills, including airport workers such as passenger and baggage screeners employed by the Transportation Security Administration and air traffic controllers.

Food pantries had to be stocked to supply the needs of many federal workers and their families. The indignation of these workers only increased after Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, a billionaire, in response to a question by a reporter who noted that federal workers were being forced into homeless shelters, said that “there really is not a good excuse” for workers not to have savings.

Not only were federal workers under considerable pressure—all the more so in the case of air traffic controllers, who are understaffed and normally work under stressful conditions—but the health and safety of the public was being endangered by the partial government shutdown.

The eruption of federal worker anger was foreseeable, especially given the example set by the rise in militancy by workers around the world in recent weeks, from the Los Angeles teachers to the Matamoros autoworkers along the US-Mexican border.

In fact, the trade union executives who have oversight over employees in the airline industry warned the ruling class of the potential for working class action. On Wednesday, National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) President Paul Rinaldi, Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) President Joe DePete and Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA) President Sara Nelson issued a joint statement about what was already an escalating situation facing federal air travel workers. It said, in part:

“Staffing in our air traffic control facilities is already

at a 30-year low and controllers are only able to maintain the system's efficiency and capacity by working overtime, including 10-hour days and 6-day workweeks at many of our nation's busiest facilities. Due to the shutdown, the FAA has frozen hiring and shuttered its training academy, so there is no plan in effect to fill the FAA's critical staffing need. Even if the FAA were hiring."

While feigning concern over traveler safety, the union executives were acutely aware of the mounting anger of the memberships of their organizations and feared, above all, a revolt from below that could destabilize their political alliance with the Democratic Party. Calls for strike action were becoming increasingly popular on social media.

On Friday, some air traffic controllers clearly felt they could take no more, although to what extent the sick calls were part of a conscious plan is not yet clear. But, as one air traffic controller in the New York area told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Whatever ATC [air traffic controller] shortage there was, it was not from the union leadership."

This should be contrasted to this statement from the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE): "We took to the streets for days on end. And we won!"

Yesterday was dubbed a "Day of Action" by AFGE. But, as another federal worker told the WSWS, "So far as I could tell—I scoured the web and signed up to be notified by them of any rallies—their day of action consisted of inaction everywhere but a small rally in Philly."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to passengers and staff at LaGuardia Airport yesterday morning at the height of the delays and found, despite the inconvenience, widespread support for federal workers and contempt for the political establishment

Natasha, a passenger from Canada traveling with a group of friends, waited while her flight to Miami was delayed. Commenting on a month without wages for federal workers, she said, "It's unfair to the workers. They have homes, car payments, education, they have families. This is not right." Despite her delay, Natasha supported the actions of air traffic controllers. "It shows what workers have to do," she said. "They have to not come to work, completely shut it down. If they're not getting paid, they have to walk out."

"If they stick together—it's like when Colin Kaepernick started the [NFL anthem] protest and everyone followed. They got rid of him, and he got a Nike deal anyway, but they can't get rid of everyone."

A gate assistant at Terminal B in the airport, who did not want to be named, told the WSWS, "Not getting paid for a month, I would want to take action. It's up to them to determine what that is, but you need to do what you need to do."

"If they were all to walk out it would be chaos," she said. "I'm not sure what our president would do because he's so stubborn, but I know it would be chaos."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact