

US aviation officials push to resume normal air traffic operations while coronavirus spreads

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The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has slowly been resuming pre-pandemic air traffic controller scheduling as passenger and cargo flights have increased over the last few months. Over 14,000 controllers keep track of as many as 5,000 flights in the skies above the US at any given moment.

After the forced closure of air traffic control (ATC) towers in March due to COVID-19 infections among air traffic controllers, the FAA and the National Air Traffic Controller Association (NATCA) agreed to “dynamic scheduling” to continue operations. Under the agreement, air traffic controllers worked in dedicated teams to contain breakouts within smaller groups of controllers. Between March 17 and July 9, nearly 90 air traffic control facilities reported at least one coronavirus case, with about 165 workers infected throughout the system.

The FAA told flightglobal.com in July, “If a member of a team tests positive for the virus, that team self-isolates, if necessary, and a back-up crew steps in. We also bring in a professional service to conduct a deep cleaning of any affected areas.”

The dynamic scheduling involved pared down skeleton crews that were handling sharply reduced numbers of flights. Controllers were told that if air traffic were to rise beyond what the limited staffing was able to safely handle, that flight restrictions, such as delays on the ground, would be implemented.

By July 6, the FAA issued a safety alert to operators warning that some airspace may be left uncontrolled, or monitored by a different facility, due to tower or regional center closures:

“Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the National Airspace System (NAS) experienced several unplanned ATC

facility shutdowns, leaving the designated airspace uncontrolled or controlled by an en route facility.”

Chicago’s Midway International Airport was forced to close in mid-March when the FAA reported that “several” technicians (Reuters reported that the number was three) had tested positive for the coronavirus. This was followed by the closure of the Las Vegas and Indianapolis airports as COVID-19 infections were also reported there. The Midway infections were the first coronavirus cases recorded by the FAA.

NATCA’s response to the Midway closure was to praise the FAA and encourage illusions that the federal agency would protect controllers. While declaring its hope “there will be no additional COVID-19 infections,” the union said, “We are encouraged that the FAA is pursuing the rapid testing of all personnel at MDW Tower.”

Since then, however, infections have continued to spread among controllers and the FAA has not made testing mandatory. Even if a worker tests positive, it takes days before the results come back and for management to then authorize a cleaning of the facility. Positive test results are largely kept secret, with the FAA hypocritically claiming the need to “respect employee health information.” Management then decides how to conduct contact tracing with no transparency to the workers.

A November 17 article posted by *Aviation Week Network* quoted FAA Chief Operating Officer Teri Bristol, who admitted, “To date, our JCAT (Joint Crisis Action Team) has worked more than 300 confirmed Covid cases in our workforce, from across the continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii and the Caribbean.”

However, a detailed tower-by-tower analysis of

infections shows a total of 626 COVID-19 cases, twice as high as Bristol acknowledged three weeks earlier. It is highly improbable that the number of infections doubled in a three-week period. It is far more likely that the FAA deliberately undercounts the extent of cases in order to avoid the closure of facilities and the curtailing of the number of commercial flights.

“Those of you who have visited an operational floor know that our facilities were not designed for the social distancing that is needed today,” Bristol noted. “This environment of limited separation between controllers means that a positive Covid case can remove not only the employee who tests positive but may also require quarantine of additional employees.”

Ever mindful of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike, the FAA is concealing the truth in an effort to prevent any collective action by controllers to defend their lives, which could quickly break out of the straitjacket of NATCA.

By August and September, traffic had increased, but management refused to implement the measures it had previously advised of curtailing air traffic. Instead, the FAA increasingly insisted that all controllers must come back to pre-COVID-19 scheduling, including trainees and high-risk workers who had been sent home to protect their health. The FAA said “Employees that are certified on at least one position that were deemed non-essential are recalled to duty no later than November 30, 2020 and will be assigned to a crew by the Parties [FAA and NATCA] at the local level. This recall constitutes the termination of excused absence for the purpose identified on March 23, 2020.”

NATCA has not pushed back against the dangerous measures by the FAA. This is in line with years of collaborating with the FAA and the airlines. When workers press NATCA to take action, union officials invariably say they are powerless and point to the defeat of the 1981 strike, President Reagan’s firing of 11,345 striking controllers, and the smashing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO).

The 1981 defeat was not due to any lack of militancy or popular support for the air traffic controllers, who struck in defiance of the government to demand a shorter workweek, improved wages and more staffing from the FAA. On the contrary, more than 500,000 workers marched in Washington D.C. on September

19, 1981, with the PATCO controllers at the head of the “Solidarity Day” demonstration. The AFL-CIO, however, opposed widespread demands for a general strike, and allowed Reagan to smash the strike, opening up a decade of government-backed union busting.

In 1987, NATCA was formed as a “professional” association to replace the decertified PATCO union. From the beginning its officials pledged never to condone another “illegal strike.”

Nearly 40 years after PATCO struck over dangerous understaffing, exhausting schedules and inadequate pay, controllers face the same issues today. NATCA has worked to prevent any challenge to these conditions by the rank and file.

To defend their lives and conditions, workers have to build rank-and-file safety committees to unite workers across the airline industry who are facing mass layoffs, wage cuts and unsafe conditions as the airlines increase flights. This struggle must be combined with the fight for the transformation of the airlines into public utilities, and a redirection of resources from the Wall Street bailout and Pentagon war budget, to hire more air traffic controllers, provide sufficient PPE and secure safe conditions, enforced by rank-and-file safety committees.



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