

40 years after the firing of PATCO strikers

US air traffic controllers union pushes through contract extension

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The National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) on Monday announced it signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to extend the expiration date of the current contract for four more years, with no new negotiations.

The current contract, referred to as the “Slate Book,” was due to expire on July 24, 2022 but now has been unilaterally extended to 2026. The announcement of the MOU by outgoing NATCA President Paul Rinaldi and Executive Vice President Trish Gilbert proudly exclaims: “This extension is another result of NATCA’s highly successful and productive collaborative relationship with the FAA, as well as a new administration committed to supporting federal employees and collective bargaining rights.”

NATCA President-elect Rich Santa and Executive Vice President-elect Andrew LeBovidge also expressed their support, with Santa saying, “This MOU will provide stability for the workforce, ensure continued collaboration to modernize the NAS [National Airspace System], and provide the traveling public with the safest air transportation system in the world.”

LeBovidge added his support by saying, “This CBA [collective bargaining agreement] extension preserves the existing work rules and future pay adjustments for the duration of the extension. It is also the continuation of the strong desire for both parties [the FAA and NATCA] to remain focused on building a collaborative environment and improving the safety of the NAS by continuing to work together.”

In reality, the NATCA is preserving an agreement that will continue to erode the quality of life for controllers over the period of a full decade. The contract was originally signed in 2016. In addition to their contractual

raises not keeping up with inflation and cost of living, controllers confront handshake agreements made by the union in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the workforce, which are effectively a dead letter.

Air traffic controllers have been forced to work in close proximity using shared equipment during the pandemic with almost no cleaning or support from management. NATCA spent the last year focused on maintaining scheduling, while providing no resistance when the airlines increased their flights, and the FAA demanded a return to normal overlapping schedules that carried a much higher risk of COVID-19 infection.

Under the George W. Bush administration, when the last NATCA contract ended, the FAA imposed brutal work rules and massive pay cuts without collective bargaining with the union. When the Obama administration negotiated a contract, which contained modest improvements, NATCA nevertheless accepted the continuation of huge concessions compared to the pre-Bush contract, with lasting consequences for air traffic controllers.

New controllers pay increasingly more into their benefits while being on an entirely different and lower pay scale than those controllers who were hired before Bush’s imposed work rules (IWR), while all controllers have been losing the battle with inflation due to inadequate cost-of-living increases for over 15 years. Most controllers today have been hired under these degraded conditions and have been waiting for an opportunity to be “made whole” from the debacle of the Bush IWR.

The announcement of the extension came as a shock to many air traffic controllers, who had been expecting an attempt at negotiating a better contract under the Biden administration, which describes itself as the “most pro-

union administration in history.” This exposure of NATCA’s role as enforcer of the FAA and protector of the airlines’ profits has not gone unnoticed, and many controllers are threatening to quit the union, citing their treatment during the last year and a half as the last straw.

The agreement between NATCA and the federal government has an added significance, coming as it does on the 40th anniversary of the PATCO strike in 1981. In a carefully planned and orchestrated campaign, the Reagan administration provoked a strike by 15,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) and then fired all of the strikers and imprisoned several of the union’s leadership, destroying the union. PATCO members were blacklisted, and most never worked in their chosen profession again.

Reagan’s attack on PATCO was a calculated move, the spearhead of a broader counteroffensive by the capitalist class to claw back all of the concessions wrested by the working class over generations of struggle. But the Reagan’s victory in PATCO was assured by the complicity of the AFL-CIO union federation, which refused to mobilize its members to defend the strike.

The defeat of PATCO was the major turning point in the collapse and degeneration of what had been the “labor movement” in the United States. It was followed by a series of unionbusting campaigns and bitter strikes which were isolated and defeated by the unions, including the strike by copper miners at Phelps Dodge in 1983-86, the Hormel strike in 1985-86, Pittston coal miners in 1989-90 and countless others.

While union membership has collapsed to about 10.8 percent of the US workforce, barely half of what it had been in 1983, the unions themselves have amassed billions of dollars in assets, with salaries for top officials ballooning into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The unions, basing themselves on support for the national interests of US capitalism and its “right” to make a profit, responded to the corporate government assault on workers by seeking out lucrative corporatist arrangements with the companies, transforming themselves into little more than labor contractors and industrial police for management.

As for the air traffic controllers, PATCO was eventually replaced in 1987 by NATCA. “Organized” out of the scabs who had replaced the PATCO strikers, the NATCA explicitly opposes any work action by air traffic controllers, citing the demise of PATCO as the excuse, and collaborates openly with the FAA. NATCA President Paul Rinaldi makes \$312,179 per year in total salary, while Patricia Gilbert, NATCA executive vice president,

makes \$311,273 per year.

In February, President Biden issued an executive order establishing the White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment to encourage a growth in union membership. Jared Bernstein, one of Biden’s economic advisors, said, “This is an all-hands-on-deck effort. The marching order from the president is everything we do in the job market space needs to reflect the importance of unionization.”

But the same Biden administration’s extension of the NATCA contract demonstrates that the strategic aim of its promotion of the unions is not the development of organized working class resistance but just its opposite. It intends to use the trade unions, which after PATCO became transformed into corrupt corporatist bodies, as a means of blunting and demobilizing this opposition. In promoting the present-day trade unions, it is not promoting organizations which, like PATCO (albeit a conservative union that had even endorsed Reagan in the previous election), are prepared to organize a struggle against the demands for concessions from the corporations and capitalist state, but organizations like the NATCA, a scab organization based openly on the suppression of the class struggle.

NATCA’s betrayals result from the very foundation of the “professional association’s” existence as a corporatist, procapitalist organization. We urge air traffic controllers to join other logistics workers, teachers and industrial workers in forming their own rank-and-file committees to join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), independent of the duplicitous trade unions in order to protect themselves and their families.



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