

Forty years since the PATCO strike: Part one

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On August 3, 1981, 13,000 members of the union of air traffic controllers in the US—the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO)—went out on strike against their employer, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). For years, 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. PATCO workers demanded a shorter workweek, higher wages and increased staffing.

Hours after they walked out, President Ronald Reagan, speaking from the White House Rose Garden, invoked the anti-strike Taft-Hartley Act to fire the controllers if they did not return to work within two days. The Reagan administration’s terms were simple: the ending of the strike and the total submission of the union to all White House demands. There would be no negotiations.

Air traffic controllers defied the back-to-work order *en masse*, with 12,000 remaining on strike. Yet in spite of their militancy and solidarity, and deep support for their struggle within the working class as a whole—expressed in the 500,000-strong Solidarity Day demonstration on September 19 in Washington, D.C. [1]—the strike was isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, whose member unions in the airline industry and ground transportation crossed the PATCO picket lines to ensure defeat.

By the end of the year, it was clear that the air traffic controllers had been beaten. The Reagan administration and the courts outlawed the union, the strikers had been replaced by scabs drawn from management and the military, and all of the striking air traffic controllers were blacklisted from their profession for life.

The ferocity of the ruling class stunned workers. But Reagan’s ruthlessness—which included dozens of arrests and the jailing and prosecution of three militant controllers in Texas—was enabled by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Though the threat posed by Reagan’s attack on the controllers to the entire labor movement was clear, the AFL-CIO refused to authorize a broader working class mobilization, in spite of persistent calls from workers for a general strike.

The trade union officials sought political cover by instructing workers to appeal for support to the Democratic Party. But the union-busting operation was carried out with the support of the Democrats. In fact, the very plan Reagan implemented for smashing PATCO, including the military scabbing operation known as the Management Strike Contingency Force, had been drawn up in 1980 by Langhorne Bond of the Federal Aviation Administration under Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

The AFL-CIO gave the Reagan administration assurances that it would do nothing in response to government strike-breaking and union-busting. In the face of pressure from workers calling for broader strike action in support of PATCO, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland said early in the struggle that he opposed “anything that would represent punishing, injuring or inconveniencing the public at large for the sins or transgression of the Reagan administration.” So confident was Reagan in the acquiescence of the labor bureaucrats, he delivered his August 3 back-to-work ultimatum even as the AFL-CIO Executive Council was meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago.

The Workers League, the American organization in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International and predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, played a prominent role in the PATCO strike. Its defense of arrested strikers earned the Workers League the support of many PATCO workers. Important rank-and-file leaders of the air traffic controllers joined the Workers League. Reporters for the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League and a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, interviewed scores of strikers and their families in cities across the country. The coverage and the interviews contained in the *Bulletin* provide what is by far the most significant and detailed chronicle of the PATCO strike. It is impossible to understand the struggle, or its outcome, without this archive.

The Workers League persistently called for the struggle to be widened to encompass the entire working class. It insisted that the conditions for expanding the strike could be achieved only through a political struggle against the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. The Workers League raised the demand for an emergency Congress of Labor to bring together unionized workers and unorganized sections of the working population for the purpose of building toward a general strike, and the establishment of a Labor Party based on the unions to fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies. Without the initiation of such a struggle, the party declared, the PATCO strike could not be won. If the PATCO strike were allowed to be isolated and defeated, the Workers League further warned, it would set the stage for an assault on the entire working class.

While a sense of militant solidarity prevailed among workers—along with a desire for a showdown with the Reagan administration—the need for socialist political conceptions to guide the struggle was not broadly understood. This was itself a product of long historical processes. By the 1980s, decades of anti-communism promoted by the AFL-CIO had blocked many workers from knowledge of key historical experiences, including the decisive role socialists had played in building the industrial union movement in the 1930s.

The government-organized destruction of PATCO was a signal to big business to launch a massive attack on the entire labor movement. Over the next decade, strike-breaking and union-busting operations were carried out in virtually every sector of the economy—air and ground transport, auto, steel, coal, retail, garments and textiles and many more. The PATCO defeat established a pattern for every strike that followed in the 1980s and through the early 1990s. At Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, United Airlines, AT Massey, Hormel, Caterpillar, etc., workers carried out militant and

bitter struggles. It was not for lack of a fight that these and other strikes in the period went down to defeat. Rather, in each case the union bureaucracy consciously worked to isolate, demoralize and defeat the strikers.

In this way, the betrayal of PATCO signaled the collapse of the trade unions and their rapid conversion into agencies of the corporations and the state. The transformation of the unions into business entities was completed over the course the 1980s. But it could not have proceeded without the crushing of the resistance of the working class and the purging of militant workers. The victimized PATCO workers were the first martyrs of the union bureaucracy's final betrayal.

There has never been a golden age of American trade unionism. Union officials have always found plenty of daylight between the interests of the bureaucracies they serve and those of the rank-and-file workers they claim to represent. Labor history is littered with the careers of once militant and socialist-minded workers, who, having found their way off the shop floor and into plum jobs in the union apparatus, quickly forgot their fighting days. Rare indeed were those who could say, together with the pioneering socialist Eugene Debs, who turned his back on the bureaucracy, "When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks."

And yet, in an earlier period, in spite of its richly deserved reputation for corruption and vicious anti-communism, the American trade union bureaucracy sensed that its position and wealth were derived from the workers. Union officials wanted to keep workers off picket lines and under contract, but it was also true that union treasuries were dependent on workers' dues. Before the globalization of economic production fatally undermined nationally-based labor organizations—that is, as late as the 1970s—unions could be compelled by rank-and-file workers to secure wage, benefit and safety improvements through strikes or threats to go on strike. Labor conflict was a daily feature of American social life.

But in the wake of PATCO, the unions, where they still existed, became the instruments by which wage cuts, benefit concessions and other business and government demands were imposed on workers. Meanwhile, the union apparatus insulated itself from plummeting membership by latching on to myriad new streams of revenue derived from business operations like "joint" training centers, management of retirement and health care funds, positions on competitiveness think tanks and even seats on corporate boards. The unions that emerged from the 1980s could no longer be said to "represent" workers in the way the dictionary tells us they should. Their wealth was now based directly on the exploitation of workers.

The PATCO defeat thus sets off two distinct periods in American labor history. From the 1930s through the 1970s, the trade union movement in the US commanded significant authority in the working class. The victories of the industrial unions in the 1930s, the mass upsurge of the working class at the end of World War II, the persistence of large-scale strike activity through the 1950s and the 1960s, and the strike wave of the late 1960s through the mid-1970s—these struggles had managed to wrest significant concessions from the American ruling class, which was conscious of the danger of working class revolution as had taken place in Russia in 1917. The epoch saw major improvements in living standards, the expansion of democratic rights to black workers in the South and the creation of a limited welfare state.

After the crushing defeats of the 1980s, strikes virtually disappeared in the US. The lack of organized resistance by the working class, in turn, only whetted the appetite of the capitalists. This is reflected in the staggering concentration of wealth in the US that has taken place since the 1970s.

Steadily, the gains of the middle decades of the 20th century were reversed, a process that accelerated after the financial crisis of 2008 and the coming to power of the Obama administration, and intensified once more in the response of the Trump and Biden administrations to the

COVID-19 pandemic, with the funneling of trillions of dollars to Wall Street and the super-rich.

Forty years on, it is clear that PATCO was one of a series of international events that signaled a global ruling class counterrevolution against the working class. It presaged the collapse of not only the American trade unions, but of all the labor bureaucracies and political parties internationally that based themselves on nationalism and class compromise. The process that has culminated in the conversion of the American labor unions into business enterprises was mirrored in the decision of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s to complete its counterrevolutionary mission by liquidating the property relations established by the 1917 October revolution, reestablishing capitalism and dissolving the Soviet Union.

The importance of the PATCO strike is well understood in ruling circles. The chair of the Federal Reserve at the time, Paul Volcker, later recalled that "the most important single action of the [Reagan] administration in helping the anti-inflation fight was defeating the air traffic controllers' strike." Volcker's replacement as Fed chief, Alan Greenspan, went further, recalling in 2009 that Reagan's crushing of the strike was "perhaps the most important" act of his first term. [2]

The smashing of PATCO was understood as the corollary to the eruption of American imperialism abroad. Writing of the possible outcomes of the strike, Donald Devine of the Reagan administration explained that, "Very importantly... governments internationally have been very impressed with the President's strong position on the issue."

And days after the beginning of the strike, the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized that Reagan had to prevail over the air traffic controllers "for all sorts of far-reaching reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with relations between the Federal Aviation Administration and PATCO." The more important issues, the editorial declared, were "commitments to rebuild military strength, to restore the dollar to soundness, to cut taxes and regulations, to resist Soviet imperialism, and to curb the wild ascent of federal spending."

The *Bulletin* commented on August 11, 1981: "In short, the ruling class considers the destruction of PATCO as inseparable from its overall capitalist policy of defending the profit system with a program of unrestrained militarism internationally and savage austerity for the working class within the United States." The subsequent 40 years have confirmed this prognosis.

But the four-decade-long suppression of working class struggle in the United States, and internationally, is coming to an end. Workers are beginning to fight back. Everywhere they enter into struggle, they quickly find themselves in conflict with the profit-making entities that continue to call themselves "unions."

This entered a new stage of development in 2021 with the formation by striking Volvo Trucks workers at the New River Valley (NRV) plant in Dublin, Virginia, of a rank-and-file committee, supported by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, to conduct a struggle against both the corporation and the United Auto Workers union.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, differentiates itself from every other political tendency on the planet when it comes to the question of the trade unions. The various pseudo-left tendencies, which are, in fact, tied politically, financially and personally to the union officialdom, argue that the unions can be reformed, and made, in some way, to represent the interests of workers, in spite of the four decades of historical evidence to the contrary.

The events at Volvo should serve as a devastating exposure of this fraud. There, workers voted down three contracts presented to them jointly by the UAW and Volvo—and showed themselves prepared to wage a formidable struggle for better wages and conditions—before the Swedish international conglomerate, abetted by the union, imposed by force and fraud the third contract in a fourth vote. Yet the workers at NRV, in

repeatedly attempting to throw off the dead weight of the union, have shown the way forward.

Rosa Luxemburg said of the working class that “historical experience is its only school mistress.” She continued: “Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey—its emancipation depends on this—is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors.”

Drawing out the lessons of past defeats is a life-and-death matter for workers entering into struggle today.

With PATCO, history exposed as unviable and bankrupt a labor movement that based itself on anti-communism, defense of the profit system and nationalism. The aim of this review of the PATCO struggle is to extract the central political lessons of that experience in order to arm workers with the socialist perspective needed to ensure victory in the mass struggles into which they are entering today.

To be continued.

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Footnotes

[1] Estimates range from over 500,000 by the *Bulletin* and by labor reporter Joseph Goulden to 400,000 by the Washington mayor’s office and several newspapers. The National Park Service estimate was 260,000. Even at that lower, official, figure, the Solidarity Day march was larger than the Civil Rights March on Washington of 1963 and the Vietnam War Moratorium demonstration of 1969.

[2] Minchin, Timothy J., *Labor under Fire: A History of the AFL-CIO since 1979*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017: 71.



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