Forty years since the PATCO strike: Part two

The historical background

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"The standard of living of the average American worker has to decline."—Paul Volcker

"Carter made his order. Now let him come down here and enforce it."—West Virginia coal miners to the Bulletin

"There is one essential question that arises out of the Chrysler bankruptcy: Who is to pay for the breakdown of the capitalist profit system, the working class or big business?"—the Bulletin

Between 1968 and 1975 a series of economic and political crises convulsed world capitalism. Advanced capitalist countries were shaken by massive strike waves, which in France in 1968 reached revolutionary proportions. In 1974, a coal miners' strike drove the Tory Heath government in the United Kingdom from power. Right-wing dictatorships fell in Portugal and Greece.

The crisis of American capitalism lay at the center of the world crisis. In 1975, the US imperialist war in Southeast Asia came to a humiliating defeat with the fall of Saigon. A year earlier, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign from office as a result of the Watergate scandal, which was bound up with the debacle in Vietnam.

The enormous financial cost of the Vietnam War accelerated the decline of US capitalism and the drain on American gold reserves. It was in response to this crisis that Nixon, in August 1971, exactly 50 years ago this month, unilaterally removed the gold backing from the US dollar. This failed to halt the weakening of US capitalism relative to its chief European and Asian rivals, and helped set in motion the high inflation and low economic growth that characterized the 1970s.

Like a number of other countries, the US experienced heightened strike activity in the 1970s. One million workers or more went on strike every year between 1969 and 1978, with the earliest years of the 1970s witnessing the most pronounced labor struggles. Strikes raged across the US, attested to by the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League and predecessor in the US of the *World Socialist Web Site*. *Bulletin* reporters covered hundreds of these struggles. The Workers League fought tenaciously throughout the 1970s to mobilize rank-and-file workers against the trade union bureaucracy and its policies of class collaboration and support for the big business Democratic Party.

The prominent role played by the Workers League contrasted sharply to the indifference of the radical protest groups, which branded American workers as pro-imperialist and racist, frequently condemning the unions as "white men's job trusts." The milieu of middle-class radicals had been moving to the right since the waning of the anti-Vietnam War protest movement in the early 1970s, embracing lifestyle and identity politics and every manner of anti-working class prejudice.

Inflation played a major role in fueling the strikes of the 1970s, as workers endeavored to maintain the buying power of their wages in the face of rising prices. To a certain degree, workers succeeded in keeping wages in line with inflation. At times they won wage hikes greater than the inflation rate, as when steel workers secured a three-year, 30 percent raise in 1971. Although the AFL-CIO bureaucracy prevented these struggles from coalescing into a political challenge to the two-party system, from the standpoint of US capitalism the situation was intolerable.

Paul Volcker, a Chase Manhattan bank executive appointed by Democratic President Jimmy Carter to head the Federal Reserve Board in 1979, put forward the ruling class position succinctly when he declared that year: "The standard of living of the average American worker has to decline."

Volcker's interest rate "shock therapy," raising the benchmark federal funds lending rate to over 20 percent, aimed to break the inflationary spiral and undermine the combativeness of the working class by creating mass unemployment. The Fed, acting on behalf of the Carter administration and the American ruling class, deliberately set out to force the closure of large sections of US manufacturing that were no longer profitable. Over 6.8 million jobs were lost to plant closures between 1978 and 1982. Whole cities and regions—primarily those associated with mass production industries and industrial unions—were devastated, including much of the industrial Midwest.

However, it was not enough to alter economic conditions to the detriment of workers, as experience had taught. Nixon's attempt to impose wage controls in 1971 had failed to stem the strikes of the 1970s. The ruling elite sought a clear and decisive defeat of the labor movement. The goal was to intimidate and weaken the working class and encourage private industry to launch a union-busting campaign.

The battle had to be chosen carefully. In the 111-day coal miners' strike of 1977–1978, Carter attempted to impose a Taft-Hartley back-to-work order on the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The miners flouted the order, burning copies of Carter's edict on the picket lines.

"Carter made his order," workers told the *Bulletin*. "Now let him come down here and enforce it." Another slogan was "Taft can mine it, Hartley can haul it, and Carter can shove it." Carter was humiliated and lost the confidence of the ruling class, which shifted its support decisively to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election.

A different target was needed. Indeed, when rank-and-file UMWA members once again initiated a national strike in April of 1981—by rejecting by a large margin a sellout contract imposed by the union—just weeks before the PATCO struggle, the new Reagan administration did not invoke Taft-Hartley or otherwise directly intervene. The 160,000-strong strike lasted for 72 days, with the coal operators of the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) refusing any modification of the offer rejected by the miners. Ultimately, the miners won minor concessions from the operators.

Reagan did not intervene against the miners because preparations were already far advanced to make an example of PATCO, a young, small and relatively isolated union.

Executive Order 10988, issued by President John Kennedy in 1962, had allowed federal workers to organize, and the Civil Service Reform Act of

1978 had granted them collective bargaining rights. Until 1968, air traffic controllers belonged to a toothless grouping called the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE). In that explosive year, a handful of workers, fed up with poor working conditions and the NAGE's inability to redress them, founded PATCO. Local slowdowns and sick-outs demonstrated the new organization's potential strength, and in March 1970—simultaneous with a massive wildcat strike of US postal workers—PATCO staged a one-month sick-out.

By 1976, PATCO had achieved the greatest union density of any union in the federal sector. Its 13,681 members comprised 85 percent of the eligible workforce. Most PATCO members had military backgrounds, and prior to that, working class backgrounds. Joseph McCartin, a historian of the 1981 strike, found that many strike leaders' fathers had been members of unions, and that as youth they had experienced strikes. [1]

In the preceding years, a whole series of technological innovations, dependent on advancing computer technology, were deployed by the Federal Aviation Authority and mastered by air traffic controllers. These collectively made air travel safer. They potentially reduced the demand for air traffic control labor per flight, but they did not make the job simpler. The controllers were necessary for the deployment and refinement of the new technologies. Computer systems frequently crashed—6,651 times in 1979 alone. [2]

Air traffic control was, and is, one of the most difficult and high-stress jobs in the world. At any moment, a single air traffic controller may be responsible for dozens of flights carrying thousands of passengers coming and going from multiple trajectories, in airplanes with differing speed capabilities, and each operating on its own timetable. These flights may be operating over tens or hundreds of thousands of square miles in vastly different weather patterns and above totally different infrastructure. It is an extraordinarily technical field.

One scholar of the profession has referred to the job as "three-dimensional chess game," citing a summary of the controllers' work by *Smithsonian* magazine: "Controllers use the analytical talents of a chess grand master, the mental calculations of a mathematician and the terse language of a police dispatcher. They're taught to perform their jobs with the cool assurance of a bullfighter." [3]

Airline deregulation, driven by President Jimmy Carter and Senator Edward Kennedy, both Democrats, undermined the point-to-point system of air traffic. This was replaced by the hub-and-spoke system, greatly increasingly the workplace stress of controllers at "hub" airports. Simultaneously with increased stress and workload, the air traffic controllers saw their wages eroded by the inflation of the 1970s. Overall, federal workers saw a 3.1 percent decline in real terms each year from 1973 to 1981. [4]

Before the 1976 presidential election, PATCO had sought to trade a political endorsement of Republican Gerald Ford for more favorable treatment. Rebuffed, it endorsed Carter in 1976. But Carter only made conditions worse, with controllers seeing the erosion of early retirement along with a decline in real wages. In early 1980, the Carter administration began to make elaborate plans for dealing with the air traffic controllers union. PATCO was aware that Carter was singling it out, and, for this reason, endorsed Reagan for the presidency after the latter assured the union that he would respond to its grievances.

"You can rest assured," Reagan wrote to PATCO President Robert Poli just before the 1980 election, "that if I am elected president, I will take whatever steps are necessary to provide our air traffic controllers with the most modern equipment available and to adjust staff levels and work days so that they are commensurate with achieving a maximum degree of public safety."

Reagan, of course, was lying.

But the Carter-Reagan plans for PATCO could not have been achieved without the complicity of "organized labor." The unions had already made it clear over the course of the 1970s that they would not mount a serious struggle against union-busting or wage-cutting. They did so through their commitment to, and increasingly active involvement in, various schemes to secure American competitiveness. In this regard, the Chrysler bailout of 1979 was a landmark.

The United Auto Workers (UAW), then one of the most powerful unions in the US, signed off on wage and benefit concessions in order to secure a government loan to keep Chrysler from going bankrupt. The UAW told workers that this was a one-time give-back to the company, made necessary by extraordinary circumstances, and that the workers' sacrifice would return the company to profitability, after which the lost pay would be returned. As the Workers League warned at the time, the betrayal carried out by the UAW at Chrysler was the beginning of a policy of concessions, which have escalated ever since.

The *Bulletin* wrote in 1979: "There is one essential question that arises out of the Chrysler bankruptcy: Who is to pay for the breakdown of the capitalist profit system, the working class or big business? The answer of big business, the banks, the Democrats, the Carter administration and the UAW bureaucracy is, of course, the working class."

The Carter administration's role in pushing through the Chrysler bailout on the backs of the autoworkers laid bare the fact that the Democratic Party could not be pressured to secure the interests of workers. Its liberal wing, headed by Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, played a critical role in the rollback of wages and conditions. It was Kennedy who led the push for the deregulation of the trucking and airline industries, the consequences of which contributed to driving the PATCO workers into struggle.

Carter administration officials later publicly took credit for the PATCO union-busting operation. The plan was devised in early 1980 by Langhorne M. Bond, Carter's appointee to head the FAA, and Clark H. Onstad, chief counsel to the FAA and also a Carter appointee. As early as 1978, Onstad began to work up plans for criminalizing a PATCO strike in discussions with Philip B. Heymann, Carter's assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division of the Justice Department.

The speed with which the FAA brought in replacement controllers under Reagan stands as a testament to these advanced preparations. At the beginning of the strike, the FAA academy in Oklahoma City suddenly increased its cohort from the typical class size of 70 to 1,400. Ray Van Vuren, director of operations for the FAA, said during the strike, "I knew we had too many (controllers) even before the strike, but it was impracticable to attempt to streamline the controller force because of expected resistance from the union." If the controllers had not gone on strike, they would have faced as many as 3,000 layoffs.

"Incredibly detailed planning [went] on for more than a year because we just knew the strike was going to happen," Onstad told the *New York Times* in the midst of the strike. The *Times* remarked, "Reagan administration officials enthusiastically polished and put into effect the plans first drafted in the Carter Administration."

These schemes cannot be explained on a purely fiscal basis. As PATCO workers noted, there would be enormous costs associated with training thousands of new controllers, to say nothing of the damage to the economy resulting from the inevitable restriction of commercial flights. The Reagan administration wound up paying some $2 billion just for the training of new controllers.

The grievances of the controllers, who were generally portrayed in the media as privileged, pampered and arrogant, involved genuine safety concerns for fliers. It is true that PATCO controllers were paid more than most US workers. The median salary for a journeyman controller at a busy airport was $32,000. At busy facilities, with overtime, controllers could earn up to $56,000. [5] But they performed difficult, complex, and highly stressful work that carried immense responsibilities for the lives and safety of others.

In discussions with *Bulletin* reporters, PATCO strikers again and again said they were compelled to strike because understaffing and other FAA policies had raised the stress level of their jobs to the breaking point. Workers raised grievances over the length and intensity of shifts, which needlessly added to their occupational stress.

Grueling conditions led many to early retirement over health issues. “Our job is separating airplanes,” Detroit Metropolitan Airport controller John Neece told the *Bulletin*. “We keep them from colliding. You never really get used to it… In the 12 years since I’ve been here, I’ve seen one guy go out on a normal retirement and 20 go out with medicals—bad ulcers, nerves, heart problems. I’m 38 now and the chances are I won’t make it until retirement. If you go out on medical they just give you 40 percent of your pay and say get the hell out… What we’re doing is like three-dimensional chess. But in this game, when it’s checkmate, you’re gone.”

“We have no breaks,” Oakland air traffic controller Tom King explained to a *Bulletin* reporter. “We work eight hours straight. We just eat at the scope. We haven’t had a heater or an air conditioner at all.”

“I know one guy in eight years who has retired normally from here,” said another Detroit striker, Bud Pierce. “When I get home at night it takes me two or three hours before I can unwind. They rotate shifts so that you can leave here at 10 at night and have to be back at 7 a.m. the next morning.”

A study that came out in the early days of the strike, reported in the *New York Times*, found that US air traffic controllers worked many more hours per week, and days per year, than their counterparts in other industrialized countries, in spite of the fact that traffic volumes in the US were typically much higher. In Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Austria, France, Switzerland, West Germany, Denmark and Norway, controllers worked an average of 35 hours per week. In the US, the average was 40. In those 10 countries, workers had an average of 32 vacation days per year, and typically between a half year and a full year of paid sick leave. American controllers averaged 19 vacation days and could take only 13 paid sick days.

Negotiations over these and other grievances with the Reagan administration in the early months of 1981 produced no significant results. This was by design. The White House was intent on forcing a strike. PATCO sought a contract that would have brought $700 million more in new costs for the FAA. Reagan’s FAA would not budget past $40 million.

Union leader Robert Poli accepted the offer, but the rank-and-file rejected it by an overwhelming vote of 95 percent “no,” 13,495 to 616. Rank-and-file workers demanded a 32-hour work week and a 30 percent pay increase. The rank-and-file ordered Poli back to the bargaining table. [6]

To be continued.

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Footnotes

[1] McCartin, Joseph Anthony. *Collision Cours e: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America*, 2013: 156; Nordlund, Willis J. *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Controllers’ Strike*: Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998: 16–21; Northrup, Herbert R. “The Rise and Demise of PATCO,” Industrial and Labor Relations Review 37, no. 2 (1984): 167–84; Hurd, Richard W., and Jill K. Kriesky. “‘The Rise and Demise of PATCO’ Reconstructed.” Industrial and Labor Relations Review 40, no. 1 (1986): 115–22; Workers League Political Committee Statement, “The PATCO Strike: A Warning to the Working Class,” August, 1981. Labor Publications, Detroit: 5.

[2] McCartin, *Collision Course*: 196–197; Nordlund, Willis J. *Silent Skies*: 82–83.

[3] Nordlund, *Silent Skies*: 60.

[4] McCartin, *Collision Course*: 198–199.

[5] Nordlund, Willis J., *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Strike*: Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998: 89–90.

[6] Greenhouse, Steven. *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008: 81; Galenson, Walter. *The American Labor Movement, 1955–1995*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996: 54; Nordlund, Silent Skies: 82–82; 94–95.