

Forty years since the PATCO strike: Part three

The strike

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“Here, we are making the first stand.”—Norman Hocker, LaGuardia controller to the Bulletin on August 5, 1981

“The only illegal strike is one that fails.”—Robert Poli

The PATCO strike began on August 3, 1981. Some 90 percent of air traffic controllers in the US voted in favor of the strike, and about 13,000 walked off the job.

The response of the Reagan administration made clear that the plan to crush the controllers’ union had been worked out well in advance. Reagan immediately invoked the national emergency clause of the anti-working class Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947, firing all workers who did not return to their jobs within 48 hours.

Reagan ordered Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis not to negotiate with PATCO. In other words, the government sought one and only one outcome—the destruction of the union.

The deadline for Reagan’s back-to-work-or-be-fired threat came on the morning of Wednesday, August 5, at 11 a.m. When the clock struck 11 and the mass firing became official, thousands of air traffic controllers in union halls, on picket lines and in parks across the country erupted into chants of “Strike! Strike! Strike!”

Hundreds of air traffic controllers from New York City’s terminals, along with supporters, rallied in East Meadow, Long Island. Gathered in a circle, they thrust their fists into the air in defiance as the deadline passed. In the middle stood six strikers holding a large “Don’t Tread on Me” flag, a symbol of the American Revolution. The workers then marched on the nearby TRACON (Terminal Radar Approach Control) facility.

In Detroit, 132 of the 134 air traffic controllers defied Reagan’s back-to-work order. Union Vice President Steve Conaway told the crowd gathered near the metropolitan airport, “The government and the FAA will not intimidate us. The grievances are real and we will stay out as long as it takes.”

In Lorain, Ohio, home of the Oberlin Air Traffic Control Center, the nation’s largest, more than 500 PATCO Local 203 members greeted the 11 a.m. deadline with fists in the air and the “Strike!” chant.

Five hundred controllers and supporters gathered between the two terminal towers of the Twin Cities International airport in Minnesota.

The great majority of the strikers defied Reagan’s back-to-work order. The government responded by stepping up what PATCO President Robert Poli called its “intensive fascist tactics.” The administration secured a court order declaring the strike illegal, making it possible to jail strike leaders and fine rank-and-file workers, and making illegal the disbursement of union funds to strikers.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) immediately filed a suit seeking the decertification of PATCO. FBI agents and federal marshals

were deployed to picket lines to photograph and otherwise intimidate the strikers. One wife of a PATCO striker reported that an FBI agent told her the couple’s effort to adopt a child would be blocked unless her husband returned to work.

On the third day, White House spokesman David Gergen let it be known that any controllers who did not return would be blackballed. “There will be no turning back, no second chances,” he said. They would be “banned from employment with the federal government forever.”

Using the rhetoric of its imperial dealings abroad, the Reagan administration called the strike a “hostage situation.” It would not negotiate with “terrorists.”

The American ruling class tore up the social contract of class compromise before the workers’ eyes. As in the Robber Baron days of the 19th century, the full force of the law and the courts was brought down on striking workers.

Within hours of the strike, temporary restraining orders and injunctions against the strike were issued by 40 federal district courts, and at least 12 US attorneys obtained contempt sanctions against union locals and their leaders.

On the first day, federal officials froze the controllers’ strike fund. Federal fines very quickly eclipsed PATCO’s assets of \$4 million. One judge, Harold Greene, levied fines of \$1 million per day. By the strike’s end, PATCO had incurred \$28.8 million in court-awarded damages, far more than its assets.

PATCO strikers were hauled before judges manacled in chains. In total, hundreds of PATCO strikers and their supporters were arrested or detained by police during the strike, and 78 faced actual charges in court. Jail time ranged from days up to one year. Others reached plea deals, and some had charges dropped. Courts acquitted only a small number.

The indictments against workers were usually based on charges of participating in an “illegal strike,” even though the air traffic controllers had been fired and therefore, legally speaking, could not be on strike. This Kafkaesque situation was even acknowledged by the courts.

On August 11, Judge Greene, a bitter enemy of PATCO, ruled against the Reagan administration’s demand that all fines be made immediately payable and that the court issue an injunction to end picketing, concluding that the government’s claim of “irreparable harm” to air safety was belied by its repeated public claims that the strike had no effect. He noted that PATCO members “cannot purge themselves of the contempt of a no-strike order when compliance with the order has been made impossible”—that is, by their firing.

Carl Kern was one of seven Chicago-area controllers indicted in mid-August. Like many others who were arrested or indicted, Kern was an outspoken leader of the struggle. “I suppose I and others have been picked because of our active role and outspokenness in the strike,” Kern said.

“The law is being applied very selectively against the most active members of PATCO.”

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) workers who voiced support, or even associated with the PATCO strikers, were fired. Harry Brown, a supervisor at the TRANCON facility on Long Island, was fired for publicly backing the controllers. Janice Wakefield, a teletype employee at the Aurora, Illinois, control center, was fired for visiting with workers on a picket line. Brian Power-Waters, a pilot for US Air, was suspended for telling passengers that their flight delay was due to unqualified workers manning the control tower.

On Monday, August 17, Secretary of Transportation Lewis declared that “the strike is over.” The air traffic control system would be rebuilt, he said, with employees drawn from among strikebreakers, supervisors and military personnel. The Reagan administration now made clear that it would not only refuse to negotiate, but would not accept the PATCO strikers back under any conditions.

PATCO workers did not back down. In fact, opposition to the repressive tactics of the Reagan administration continued to grow throughout August and September. On August 23, a rally of some 2,000 took place in Houston. On August 26, over 1,000 gathered at a rally in the Twin Cities.

These demonstrations were far eclipsed by the large-scale demonstration that took place on Labor Day, September 7, 1981, in New York City, where more than 250,000 workers demonstrated. The 2,000 PATCO members who marched front-and-center were cheered wildly. Other large Labor Day demonstrations with PATCO in the lead took place across the country, including in Detroit, where over 3,000 marched down Woodward Avenue.

The AFL-CIO had originally called the September 19 Solidarity Day demonstration in Washington, D.C., not to oppose the policies of the Reagan administration, but to support the Solidarity movement of Polish workers against the Stalinist regime in Warsaw. AFL-CIO foreign operatives, funded by the CIA, were busily attempting to steer the Polish movement in a pro-capitalist direction.

However, the convening of the demonstration, and its very name, provided an opening for workers to make themselves heard.

As the dimensions of the coming demonstration became clear, the AFL-CIO officialdom became alarmed, with the prospect of a massive turnout “quickly creating more anxiety than enthusiasm in [AFL-CIO President Lane] Kirkland’s office,” according to one historian. [1] The narrow and bankrupt aims of the unions were summed up by William Wynn, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers. “We’re not going to get much from the White House, but hopefully, we’re going to put some starch in some of our friends in Congress who have wavered a bit,” he said.

“Our friends in Congress,” meant, of course, the Democratic Party.

Workers seized on the opportunity of the demonstration to stage a mighty protest against Reagan and his onslaught on PATCO and the working class. Some workers held signs drawing comparisons between the state repression carried out by the Stalinist regime in Poland and the state persecution of the PATCO workers.

AFL-CIO locals organized at least 3,000 busloads of workers. Nearly every union in the country was represented, as were civil rights groups and other organizations affected by Reagan’s budget cutting.

Among the largest contingents were those from the UAW, with 30,000 auto workers attending; the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which brought 20,000 members; and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which mobilized 20,000. So large was the contingent from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), also estimated at 30,000, that “it took more than 40 minutes for the contingent to march by, and the whole of Constitution Avenue was a sea of the union’s green and white banners, placards, flags and t-shirts,” the *Bulletin* reported. PATCO brought 6,000

workers, or roughly half of those on strike.

The enormous demonstration made clear that there was broad support in the working class for expanding the struggle against Reagan. However, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy categorically refused to take up such a struggle, and gradually the fighting spirit in the broader working class died down.

The role of the AFL-CIO in isolating and defeating the PATCO strike, and the perspective advanced by the Trotskyists of the Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) for the struggle’s expansion into a general strike and a political fight by the entire working class, will be examined in the next installment of this series.

The PATCO workers continued their struggle, continuing for months to man picket lines that were crossed on a daily basis by other unionized air industry workers. State repression continued to focus on the most militant and outspoken leaders, including three leaders of the Dallas-Ft. Worth PATCO local who, in November, 1981, were put on trial for federal crimes.

In March, 1983, the US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered Lee Grant, Ron May and Gary Greene imprisoned for three months to a year for the “crime” of striking against the federal government, which had, in fact, fired them. They were each sentenced to 90 days in jail, and, as felons, permanently stripped of civil liberties.

The Workers League, not the AFL-CIO, led the public defense campaign. Ron May, in particular, made regular use of the *Bulletin* to appeal for working class support for PATCO and its members persecuted for their strike. He was not alone. The *Bulletin* spoke to many dozens of PATCO members, and featured regular full-page interviews and submissions from strike leaders.

On October 22, 1981, the Federal Labor Relations Authority stripped PATCO of its certification to represent air traffic controllers. Now, not only was its strike declared illegal and its participants blacklisted, but the union itself was no longer legal. The decision was upheld by a federal appeals court on June 11, 1982. On July 2, 1982, a federal bankruptcy court dissolved PATCO. In the summer of 1983, Greene, May and Grant began serving their prison terms.

To be continued.

Footnotes

[1] Buhle, Paul: *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999: 224.



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