Forty years since the PATCO strike: Part four

Two perspectives for the working class

Tom Mackaman
8 August 2021

PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE | PART FOUR | PART FIVE

"If one union, whose members work directly for Mr. Reagan, were now to achieve a spectacular wage increase through an illegal strike, that would be the end of the Reagan economic program. Investors, bankers and borrowers would all immediately conclude that, whatever his rhetoric, the Reagan Administration was not serious about reducing inflation. That's why Mr. Reagan now has to stand absolutely fast ."—Washington Post

"Labor's assistance must be forthcoming immediately. Otherwise, PATCO will die." —Letter from PATCO President Robert Poli to Lane Kirkland, December 21, 1981

"It's easy to be a midnight gin militant and call for a general strike, but if you're a responsible leader you have to appraise the consequences." —AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland

**

The AFL-CIO trade union officials argued that any extension of the strike to cover workers in the airline industry or beyond would be "suicide." Disregarding the Carter administration's role in preparing the union-busting operation, the labor bureaucracy argued that Reagan was responsible for the move against PATCO, and therefore it would be necessary to appeal to Democratic lawmakers and prepare to defeat the Republicans in the 1982 elections. AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland referred to Election Day as "Solidarity Day II."

The Workers League put forward a diametrically opposed position. Its call to reject Reagan's demands and expand the strike throughout the airline industry and into a general strike corresponded with the objective requirements of the struggle. It also articulated the thinking of workers, far more than the defeatist position of the bureaucrats.

But the Workers League insisted that this necessitated not only an industrial struggle but also a political struggle against the bureaucracy and the two-party system. A new party had to be built, a labor party based on the unions and a socialist program. To achieve this, the Workers League campaigned among workers for the calling of an emergency Congress of Labor.

The *Bulletin* immediately sized up the significance of the strike. Its lead article on August 4, 1981, a statement of the Editorial Board, was headlined "AFL-CIO Must Back Air Traffic Strike: The Class Lines are Drawn." It called on the union movement to "mobilize the strength of the entire working class to support the striking air traffic controllers against the union-busting Reagan administration."

The article continued:

> The Reagan administration has been engaged in the last six months in an economic and social counterrevolution, aimed at repealing the social legislation and programs won by the working class during the last 50 years, driving up unemployment, wiping out all restrictions on capitalist exploitation such as safety regulations, and destroying the living standards won by decades of trade union struggle. This has been topped with the passage of the biggest tax cut in history geared entirely to the requirements of the big corporations and the rich.

The article called for urgent action by the other unions representing workers in the airline industry, including the International Association of Machinists (IAM). This industrial action should be spread, it stressed, into a general strike against the policies of the Reagan administration.

Reagan, the article noted, was "speaking for the entire ruling class," a fact also understood by much of the news media, which, whether liberal or conservative, overwhelmingly condemned the air traffic controllers. As the *Washington Post* editorialized on August 4:

> If one union, whose members work directly for Mr. Reagan, were now to achieve a spectacular wage increase through an illegal strike, that would be the end of the Reagan economic program. Investors, bankers and borrowers would all immediately conclude that, whatever his rhetoric, the Reagan Administration was not serious about reducing inflation. That's why Mr. Reagan now has to stand absolutely fast.

In the initial days of the strike, the controllers believed that the withholding of their labor would be sufficient to prevail. The critical and irreplaceable nature of their work would force the Reagan administration to negotiate, many thought, and the costs associated with training new controllers would be prohibitively high—far more expensive than a compromise wage increase for PATCO.

"People with the money, the rich, are still sitting on the ground," Norman Hocker, a controller with 13 years experience at LaGuardia Airport in New York City, told the *Bulletin* in the first week of the strike. "They're cutting out corporate flights and cutting back on all other flights. You have 16,000 workers holding up 27 percent of the economy."

As the strike began, the FAA relied on a workforce of 4,669 strikebreakers, 3,291 supervisors, 800 military controllers and 1,000 new-hires to make up for the shortage caused by the nearly 12,000 who stayed out on strike. The federal government claimed to have gotten air traffic capacity up to 75 percent soon after the strike started. However, the scab

labor force in no way matched the skill and quality of the striking workers. [1]

"I'm concerned. I would not be in an airplane today if I could avoid it," Mitch Cook, a striking controller from La Guardia, told the *Bulletin*. "Right now there are three supervisors and EPDS, that's Evaluation Proficiency Development Specialist, in the tower. Normally there are 10 people. It's a mockery to think they could bring in military controllers to control here. The union understands what the capabilities of these men are. Our union is going to stand strong and united."

In fact, the firing of the PATCO workers did seriously jeopardize travelers. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) later found that "in some instances, developmental controllers were certified on a position in the morning and were conducting on-the-job training at that same control position for another developmental controller in the afternoon of the same day."

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) attributed a fatal air crash near San Jose, California to pilot error. Two light planes on approach to the city's airport collided in the air two miles short of the runway, killing one person and injuring two. The midair collision August 17 was the first in San Jose airport's history, and it was the first in which the FAA cleared the air traffic controller, a strikebreaker, of responsibility within hours. It was also the first fatal accident of that period in which PATCO was excluded from the investigation.

On January 13, 1982, a major disaster took place when an Air Florida Boeing 737 crashed into a bridge over the Potomac River in Washington D.C. shortly after takeoff, killing 78. It is possible that controller error played a role in this disaster, as snow buildup on the plane after an extended period of wait time on the runway was the likely cause.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) found controller error as a factor as well in a crash 10 days later at Boston's Logan Airport. That crash resulted in the death of two people onboard. And well after the strike ended, the federal government accepted responsibility for the crash on July 9, 1982 of Pan Am Flight 759, which killed 153 passengers, admitting that scab controllers had failed to provide adequate instruction to pilots flying in difficult weather conditions. [2]

There were many more near-misses as a result of inexperienced or incompetent air traffic controllers guiding flight patterns. While the FAA hid this information from the flying public, the Canadian Air Traffic Control Association (CATCA) documented 41 unsafe incidents on routes between the US and Canada or near the Canadian border after only one week of the strike, including a number of "near-misses."

Reagan was perfectly willing to risk the lives of air travelers to destroy PATCO. Clearly, much more was at stake in this strike than the controllers' own contract negotiations.

Many strikers told the *Bulletin* that they viewed their struggle as being waged on behalf of the entire working class. Were they to lose, they said, the union-busting campaign would spread throughout the economy. For these same reasons, many controllers and rank-and-file workers in other industries realized that PATCO could not be left to struggle alone.

"The main thing is that how Reagan handles PATCO will be a precursor to how he handles strikes in general and the whole labor movement," LaGuardia controller Norman Hocker told the *Bulletin* on August 5. "Here, we are making the first stand."

Calls for joint action soon began to emerge from workers in other industries, who recognized the historic nature of the Reagan administration's assault. The *Bulletin* and the Workers League amplified this sentiment. On Friday, August 7, the *Bulletin* ran a front-page banner headline, "Mobilize Labor Behind Air Traffic Controllers: AFL-CIO Must Call General Strike!"

On August 15, Ed Winn, a member of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 Executive Board in New York City, addressed a rally of some 400 controllers and their supporters near JFK Airport. Winn, also a leading member of the Workers League, read a resolution to be introduced at the next TWU executive board meeting calling for emergency action in support of PATCO and demanding a general strike by the entire AFL-CIO.

The same week, Houston Local 15 of the IAM sent telegrams to Kirkland and IAM President William Winpisinger demanding that a general strike be called.

Even union officials were compelled to acknowledge the sentiment for a general strike. Ralph Liberato, a Michigan AFSCME official, was asked on October 16 by the *Bulletin* whether the Michigan AFL-CIO would initiate the call for a general strike in support of PATCO. Liberato said, "There's been an awful lot of talk about this among our members, and a lot them are asking why we don't do it."

Similarly, on August 26, David Roe, president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO, told a *Bulletin* reporter that "the feeling for a general strike is strong and growing." Claiming that he would support one, he said the ultimate decision rested with the federation's Executive Council. In September, 800 delegates at the annual convention of the Minnesota AFL-CIO voted unanimously in favor of calling on the national AFL-CIO to launch a nationwide general strike.

In late September, Kirkland admitted that there was overwhelming rank-and-file sentiment for a general strike. "I have never gotten as much mail on any issue in my life. I've gotten a tremendous amount of wire, letters, cards," Kirkland said. "About 90 percent are pro-controllers and about 50 percent of those denounce me for not calling a general strike." [3]

But union officials rebuffed the calls for a general strike, with Kirkland declaring, "It's easy to be a midnight gin militant and call for a general strike, but if you're a responsible leader you have to appraise the consequences."

So provocative was Reagan's action that when the strike began, the AFL-CIO Executive Council and General Board were actually in session, at the plush Hyatt Regency in Chicago. The AFL-CIO bureaucrats were flabbergasted by news of the strike. According to historian Joseph McCartin, some of the union leaders "were only dimly aware that PATCO was an affiliate of the AFL-CIO."

Those who knew about the air traffic controllers' existence were primarily concerned with the difficulties the strike could pose to their new "jointness" friendships with big business. The Executive Council meeting sent clear signals to the Reagan administration that the AFL-CIO was prepared to collude in the crushing of PATCO.

The gathering in Chicago welcomed the UAW and its president, Douglas Fraser, back into the fold for the first time since Walter Reuther pulled out of the federation. Fraser, who was rubbing elbows with powerful capitalists on Chrysler's corporate board, worried that the strike "could do massive damage to the labor movement."

The *Bulletin* commented on August 7: "What extraordinary logic! [Reagan] is attempting to impoverish millions of working class families, but Fraser warns that to fight this government 'could do massive damage to the labor movement.'"

The AFL-CIO Executive Council began and ended on August 6, 1981 without lifting a finger for the air traffic controllers. Just one month later, on September 3, 1981, Reagan was allowed to address the annual convention of an AFL-CIO union, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. He used the occasion to launch an attack on organized labor. The assembled delegates remained politely seated. [4]

If the AFL-CIO and the unions that comprised it would not launch a general strike, they might at a bare minimum have honored the PATCO picket lines. As early as August 7, PATCO President Robert Poli sent telegrams to all AFL-CIO unions asking that they not cross picket lines that were in place at hundreds of airports around the country.

But not even the ABC trade union principle of respecting picket lines was observed. No help was forthcoming from "the House of Labor."

Indeed, if *just one* other section of the unionized airline industry had struck or even observed picket lines—the airline mechanics, the pilots, the flight attendants, the baggage handlers—the position of PATCO would have been immeasurably strengthened. The two most important unions in the airline industry, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), were the most critical to the strike's fate. Even without a general strike, actions by the IAM and ALPA would have by themselves defeated the union-busting campaign, as a Reagan Transportation Department official later recalled. "Had the machinists gone out, we couldn't have withstood it," he admitted. "It would have closed every single airport." [5]

Winpsinger of the IAM, a self-avowed "socialist" and supposedly a militant, offered rhetoric about respecting picket lines. And though some IAM locals initiated slow-downs, Winpisinger and the international union went no further than words.

Interviewing Winpisinger, a reporter for the *Bulletin* asked if he had any intention of calling a support strike among his members in the airline industry. "It would be committing suicide for 40,000 of my members," Winpisinger stated. "It might even be sounding the death knell of the whole union."

J.J. O'Donnell of ALPA did not even bother with the pretense of supporting the strike. He let the AFL Executive Council know that he would not call on his members to honor PATCO picket lines. Indeed, O'Donnell consciously worked to defeat the strike, vocally disputing PATCO's claims that the controllers' firing made air traffic less safe. This position was contradicted by a safety commission of his own union that found "a definite safety hazard" created by unqualified controllers. [6]

In fact, ALPA did not even have to violate federal labor laws to support the strike. Federal Aviation Regulation 91.3 ensures that pilots have the final say-so on whether they believe flying conditions are unsafe.

O'Donnell was, in fact, receiving regular, confidential reports from his own Air Traffic Control Committee warning of the serious "safety impact" of fatigue among overworked replacement controllers and of "higher potential danger." One pilot had written to the committee that "the possibility of a controller detecting a pilot deviation in time to prevent a safety hazard is remote." These warnings continued. ALPA only had to publicize them among its own rank and file to trigger what would have been, in effect, a sympathy strike.

Instead, O'Donnell brazenly lied to his own membership, declaring on August 19, "I can say without equivocation the air traffic control system in this country is safe. If it were not safe, we would be the first to speak out." That very day, two general aviation planes collided near San Jose, California, killing the pilot of one.

O'Donnell's scabbing operation against PATCO was part and parcel of the attack he was waging on his own pilots. Even as the air traffic controllers launched their strike, O'Donnell was negotiating wage cuts of 10 percent for Pan Am pilots and a 30 percent increase in flying time per month for United Airlines pilots. In 1983, Reagan rewarded O'Donnell for services rendered by naming him assistant secretary of labor.

The collusion of the AFL-CIO with Reagan was unknown to controllers at the time. But as early as August 13, Kirkland sought secret back-channel negotiations with the White House. On August 14, he sent a proposal through Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker offering the firing of Poli, union leaders and militant controllers. Rehired workers would be forced to pay a fine and reaffirm their no-strike oath. Reagan, in return, would offer a face-saving "fact-finding" commission to investigate union grievances.

Union workers were "unaware of these secret machinations," McCartin writes. While Kirkland worked behind the scenes to undermine the strike, the historian adds, "rank-and-file members of the AFL-CIO received little direction regarding how to respond to the very public breaking of a walkout strike."

Kirkland declared, "Member unions will have to decide for themselves what to do. I am not going to make that appraisal." [7]

The full depths of the unions' treachery may never be fully known, but it can be safely assumed that Reagan proceeded in his firing of the PATCO workers with direct assurances that the AFL-CIO would prevent sympathy actions. One example of likely collusion emerged only years after the strike. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Leon B. Applewhaite of the Federal Labor Relations Authority had an unpublicized dinner in September 1981, at which the PATCO case was discussed, in probable violation of federal labor law. Applewhaite wound up ruling in favor of PATCO's decertification. [8]

The perspective of the AFL-CIO, to pressure Democratic politicians, served only to demoralize the strikers and disorient the broader working class. There were some vague pronouncements of sympathy for the air traffic controllers from Democrats, but just as many condemned the strike. Detroit's Democratic Mayor Coleman Young, held up by the UAW in particular as a "friend of labor" and a former autoworker himself, accused the strikers of "holding the nation hostage" over "outrageous" demands, going so far as to call Reagan a "hero" for standing up to PATCO.

The Reagan administration feared that international trade unions would support PATCO. But the strike was an object lesson in the failure of international collaboration among the various nationally-based unions—though air traffic control was, by the very nature of the work, a globalized industry, and though controllers in other countries could count on being confronted soon enough with whatever concessions Reagan forced on their American brothers.

The failure to act by air traffic controller unions in other countries came in spite of broad support for PATCO among rank-and-file controllers internationally, who were struggling against similar conditions. Canadian, Mexican, German, British, French and Australian controllers had, during the 1970s, waged strikes, sickouts and slowdowns.

Indeed, in the first days of the PATCO strike, Canadian controllers in the Canadian Air Traffic Controllers Association (CATCA) refused to handle US-bound flights crossing Canadian airspace from the Atlantic, declaring the American system unsafe. The Canadian government, prodded by the Reagan administration, pressured the Canadian controllers into compliance, and CATCA called off its boycott on August 12, before another sympathy boycott by Portuguese controllers on August 16 could take effect. For some time, the Portuguese controllers refused to handle flights to the US. Spanish controllers initiated a sympathy slowdown. Some US flights from Australia were also suspended.

Despite the cave-in by their unions, controllers in Europe, Japan and Australia continued to make donations to PATCO.

The body of various national controllers unions, the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA), responding to demands from members for support to PATCO, called for an emergency meeting to be held on August 22 in Amsterdam. PATCO, however, had withdrawn from the organization years earlier, a reflection of the extreme nationalism of the American trade unions.

On August 13, in advance of the planned emergency meeting, IFATCA decided to delay indefinitely a planned sympathy boycott of US-bound flights, an action that also would have defeated Reagan. At the meeting itself, no majority for a boycott could be reached.

Within the US, the massive Solidarity Day rally in Washington showed that there existed in the working class the desire to fight Reagan's policies. It was not the only manifestation of working-class resistance.

A Labor Day demonstration against Reagan in New York City on September 7 drew 250,000. On September 8, 22,000 Philadelphia public school teachers went on strike against concessions demands and in defiance of arrests and back-to-work injunctions. Earlier in the year, some 6,000 coal miners and their families had demonstrated in Washington

D.C. in defense of Black Lung benefits and protections, 20,000 rail workers had marched against funding attacks on Conrail and Amtrak, and 100,000 workers and youth had demonstrated against Reagan's murderous policies in Central America.

But Solidarity Day proved to be the first and last significant action the AFL-CIO permitted against the administration's union-busting drive and class war policies.

After the union was officially decertified on November 3, 1981—the first time such an action was taken in American history—the AFL-CIO publicly capitulated. In the words of UAW President Fraser, "The war is over."

Seemingly oblivious to the danger the precedent set for the rest of organized labor, Kirkland stated that the Federal Labor Relations Authority decision "confirms the ability of the government to use its enormous power to break this small union."

The *Bulletin* issued a warning prior to the gathering of the AFL-CIO biennial convention in early November. "What the Convention must face up to is the fact that there is no fighting Reagan without breaking decisively with the Democratic Party and mobilizing the working class politically against capitalist policies through the construction of a Labor Party based on the trade unions."

Instead, the convention convened and dispersed having taken no concrete action to assist the controllers. This proved, the *Bulletin* noted, "the total bankruptcy of the bureaucracy's policy of class collaboration." The *Bulletin* added, "Historically it is finished." The Workers League's newspaper continued: "However, the more clear it becomes that the defense of basic rights won by the working class requires a struggle against capitalism, the more desperately does the bureaucracy cling to capitalist policies."

In December, Poli wrote to Kirkland pleading with him not to "let PATCO die." Poli stated, "Labor's assistance must be forthcoming immediately. Otherwise PATCO will die. And with that death we will be witnessing not only the destruction of a segment of organized labor, but more importantly the crushing of a relatively small union whose courage has generated a resurgence of commitment and pride." Kirkland disregarded the letter.

In a desperate measure to try to salvage his union, Poli tendered his resignation on December 31, 1981. The pound of flesh did not appease the Reagan White House.

On January 29, 1982, Gary Greene, one of the Texas controllers sentenced to prison for his role in the strike, wrote to Kirkland asking him to call a general strike. The open letter was published in the *Bulletin*.

"President Reagan is winning his battle against PATCO and will win his future fights against all unions as long as labor allows him. The only way to bring this struggle to an end and to restore credibility to union leaders is a NATIONAL STRIKE," Greene wrote. This letter was endorsed by a meeting of 180 controllers in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Kirkland's office responded by dishonestly claiming there was no support for a general strike and suggesting that unions redouble their efforts to elect Democrats in the 1982 elections.

Support for PATCO families was choked off. By February 1982, the AFL-CIO had distributed only $646,000 to 1,407 PATCO families, less than $500 per family. [9] The UAW donated a mere $100,000 in aid to PATCO, though the income at its disposal derived solely from investments averaged over $56 million per year in the early 1980s. [10]

In June of 1982, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld the Federal Labor Relations Board's decertification of PATCO.

In the summer of 1982, Gary Eads, who followed Poli as PATCO president, filed in bankruptcy court for liquidation of the union, in the face of over $39 million in damage claims awarded to the airlines against the union.

To be continued

**

Footnotes

[1] Greenhouse, Steven. *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008: 81; McCartin, Joseph Anthony. *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America*, 2013: 296-297, 301.

[2] Nordlund, Willis J. *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Controllers' Strike*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998: 149-150.

[3] "No Action from AFL-CIO," *Bulletin*. November 3, 1981: 15.

[4] McCartin, *Collision Course*: 317-318.

[5] McCartin, *Collision Course*: 292.

[6] Nordlund, *Silent Skies*: 125-126.

[7] McCartin, *Collision Course*: 315.

[8] Nordlund, *Silent Skies*: 147-148.

[9] Minchin, Timothy J. *Labor Under Fire: A History of the AFL-CIO Since 1979*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017: 66.

[10] McLaughlin, Martin, *Corporatism and the UAW: What Is Behind the Concessions — and How to Fight Them.* Detroit: Labor Publications, Inc., 1983: 16.