

Forty years since the PATCO strike: Part five

The aftermath

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“They would like us to go away. But you cannot wipe almost 12,000 people off the map.” —Bob Kenney, striking air traffic controller, to the *Bulletin*, October 26, 1981.

“Reagan has not only won the battle. He’s won the whole goddamned war.” —UAW President Douglass Fraser.

The PATCO workers were thrown into the ranks of the unemployed in the midst of the worst social crisis since the Great Depression. The first two years of the Reagan administration marked a period of carnage for the working class.

Fed Chairman Paul Volcker’s interest rate shock therapy created a vortex in the industrial economy, which, by 1982, sucked down factories and farms, cities and towns, and entire regions. By December 1981, there were 10.7 million officially unemployed, or 8.9 percent of the workforce. In 1982, the unemployment rate rose to 10.7 percent. There were 2,696 mass layoffs or plant closings, resulting in the loss of more than 1,287,000 jobs. [1]

What became of the hundreds of thousands of workers who were laid off, a flood of human misery to which the PATCO workers contributed only one tiny stream? Very few systematic studies have ever been done. In one rare exception, a 1982 Cornell University study analyzed the status of 4,700 workers laid off at the Mahwah, New Jersey Ford Plant in 1980. Half of the hourly workers were still unemployed two years later. Among those over the age of 40, 61 percent were without work; among women, 72 percent were jobless. Prior to the shutdown, median income was \$21,600. Two years later it was less than half that, \$10,400. [2]

The misery of mass layoffs was augmented by the most savage class war budgets in modern history. Reagan’s 1981 and 1982 budgets took a torch to programs that aided the most vulnerable sections of the working class—the unemployed, the poor, the elderly, children, the handicapped, Vietnam veterans, even retired miners suffering from black lung disease. At the same time, the budgets provided shamelessly massive tax cuts to the rich and the corporations, and drastically increased military spending. These naked class war policies were aided and abetted by the Democratic Party, which in both years provided the dozens of votes necessary to ensure their passage. [3]

The stated aim of creating mass unemployment was to drive down the cost of labor. One by one, the trade unions fell into line—the United Auto Workers (UAW), the United Steelworkers (USW), the Teamsters, the United Rubber Workers, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), and many others—reopening contracts and imposing concessions on rank-and-file workers.

The concessions contracts were justified by claiming they would maintain the “competitiveness” of American business or the solvency of the various levels of government. “Accept these cuts,” the unions told workers, “or you will lose your jobs.” But the workers lost their jobs anyway. Between 1981 and 1982, the AFL-CIO hemorrhaged 739,000

members, overwhelmingly due to layoffs. [4]

The catastrophic outcome for workers resulting from the PATCO defeat is perhaps most graphically illustrated by the fate of the workers in the air transportation industry, whose unions crossed PATCO picket lines to suffocate the militant struggle.

In early August 1981, with the PATCO strike already on, airline industry executives met with Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis and urged the Reagan administration to adopt a long-term flight schedule “even if that means continuing limits for several months.” When asked by a reporter if the airlines would not actually profit from the strike and reduced flights, there were broad grins in the room, and Lewis smirked. As one historian concluded, “[T]he strike permitted many carriers to take initiatives that would have been impossible without the strike... The carriers took advantage to consolidate and downsize,” eliminating routes, mothballing airplanes, and reducing staffing on flights and in terminals. [5]

The Kennedy-Carter airline deregulation of 1978 initiated a vast reorganization of the industry. Old airlines were wiped out, absorbed by rivals, or thrust into bankruptcy—including Eastern, TWA, Braniff, Pan American, Continental, Republic and Western. The immediate period of the PATCO strike was the worst-ever for the airline industry, which racked up \$137 million in red ink in 1980 and \$201 million more in the first quarter of 1981.

Airlines, beginning with Eastern and Braniff, imposed massive wage cuts on union workers, with the threat of layoffs if they resisted. On July 30, just four days before the PATCO strike began, the Air Line Pilots Association accepted \$75 million in cuts. These included a reduction to two-man crews in Boeing 737s and an increase in cockpit hours from 62 to between 81 and 85 per month.

Meanwhile, the president of the Air Line Employees Association, Victor Herbert, took home \$98,585 in 1982. The president of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), Henry Duffy, pocketed \$246,557 in 1983, and another \$74,737 in “expenses,” making him the highest-paid union bureaucrat in America. His “first vice president,” G.A. Pryde, took home \$130,818. [6]

The failure of the airline industry unions to defend PATCO cost their own workers dearly, but this was not the result of a mistaken policy. The airline unions, like all unions in the 1980s, were busy decoupling themselves from the workers they nominally represented, securing new sources of wealth and revenue. In every instance, the air industry unions traded away wage and benefit cuts in return for new streams of revenue controlled by the union bureaucracy.

Pan American Airlines in 1981 sold 11 million shares of stock, amounting to 13 percent ownership, in a union-run ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Program). It developed a whole series of joint labor-management entities. But in 1985, management reneged on promised wage increases.

In 1983, the threat of bankruptcy induced crisis negotiations with the

five unions at Western Airlines. The unions gave massive concessions and agreed to the scrapping of work rules. In return, they received four seats on the board of the doomed airline, as well as profit-sharing and stock ownership. The latter was based on a formula according to which wage cuts were “paid back” at half their value in the form of company stock. In this way, Western employees gained 32 percent of the moribund airline’s stock.

The growing role of unions in out-and-out ownership took a major step forward in 1985, when ALPA, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) paved the way for the takeover of TWA by corporate raider Carl Icahn. The unions traded wage concessions of \$200 million per year for 20 percent of TWA common stock and, theoretically, a 20 percent share of profits for three years, as well as other stock options and a share of Icahn’s profits in the event of a sale of the airline. The unions’ “success” was its ability to barter “wages and working condition concessions required to attract outside capital,” as one analysis put it.

And on it went.

In 1993, Northwest Airlines negotiated \$365 million in pay cuts for pilots over three years in exchange for company stock and three seats on the corporate board.

In 1994, United Airlines traded 55 percent ownership to employees in return for a 16 percent wage cut for pilots, a 10 percent cut for machinists, and a no-strike pledge for six years. The unions also got three members on the company’s board of directors.

Perhaps the most devastating defeat of all was that suffered by the workers at Eastern Airlines. In December 1983, three unions representing 37,500 employees (mechanics, flight attendants and pilots) agreed to \$367 million in wage cuts, ranging from 18 to 22 percent, in exchange for 25 percent of company stock and seats for four union officials on the corporate board.

Financial difficulties nonetheless mounted, and in 1985, ALPA agreed to a 20 percent wage cut as well as a two-tier pay system. Eastern was still sold off to the asset-stripper Frank Lorenzo and Texas Air, which had already absorbed Continental, imposing massive wage concessions of 50 percent there.

Lorenzo immediately began to hive off parts of Eastern to his low-cost Continental and Texas Air operations. The IAM pleaded with Lorenzo in negotiations for months before authorizing a strike in 1989, and for the first time in the 1980s, ALPA refused to cross picket lines. But the AFL-CIO sabotaged this strike too, mustering only a demoralizing PR campaign called “Fairness at Eastern.” To deal with the strike, Lorenzo simply declared bankruptcy. The courts and the Bush administration backed the corporation, and the union workers lost not only their jobs, but also their pensions and benefits.

One desperate Eastern employee wrote her Georgia congressman in 1991:

Our unemployment checks will stop in July. Many of us are left without health or life insurance and by now are very close to losing our homes. Many of us are in the 50s age group and are helplessly watching everything we have worked so long and hard for slowly disintegrate before our eyes.

As for the PATCO air traffic controllers, the American ruling class never forgave them for the determined stand they took against the attacks of the Reagan administration.

On December 23, 1982, just two days before Christmas and one year after the strike’s total defeat, a federal judge seized \$4 million in charitable donations supporting the needy families of the blackballed

controllers. These were donations mailed and wired to the strikers from workers in the US and internationally. The judge admitted that the charity fund was not the property of the bankrupt and decertified PATCO union, and instead belonged to individual former members of the union. He nonetheless declared that this small amount of money had to be turned over to the airlines.

“To permit the return of the trust monies to members of the union that have acted in clear defiance of established law would be to reward PATCO members for their illegal action,” Judge Roger M. Whelan ruled.

By 1986, one-third of PATCO members earned so little that their families qualified for food stamps. [7] That year, Republican Congressman Guy Molinari introduced a modest measure that would have allowed 1,000 of the 12,000 blackballed PATCO workers to apply for jobs as FAA air traffic controllers. The measure was defeated by the Democratic Party-controlled House of Representatives by a margin of 226-193.

The ban on the rehiring of PATCO strikers was officially lifted by the Clinton administration only in 1993. This turned out to be a final act of humiliation. Within one year, about 40 percent of the blackballed controllers reapplied for work with the FAA. However, they found that “their applications were processed without preference,” and the very next year, 1994, saw the FAA impose a systematic hiring freeze. Only 37 of the PATCO controllers were rehired.

The union that replaced PATCO in the airline industry, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), could never claim the fiction of being a “free trade union.” It was an organization created and controlled by the state and populated with strikebreakers. From its inception it promised that it would never carry out an “illegal” strike as PATCO had—in other words, it would never authorize a strike at all.

The working conditions of air traffic controllers only worsened. From 1981 until 1985, the volume of air traffic increased from 66.7 million flights to 71.4 million flights. In the same period, the number of “full performance level” (FPL) air traffic controllers fell from 13,205 to 8,315. By 1988, in spite of increasing flight volumes, there were still far fewer FPL controllers than in 1981, only 8,904 in all. [8]

The consequences of this severe understaffing were tragically revealed in 2006 in Lexington, Kentucky, when a Comair Flight crashed after attempting to take off from the wrong runway, killing all 47 passengers and two of the three-member crew. After correctly giving the plane its runway assignment, the lone air traffic controller on duty had proceeded to other tasks, as required by FAA protocol.

Around the time of the 30th anniversary of the PATCO strike, in April of 2011, a scandal was whipped up by the media over incidents of air traffic controllers falling asleep on the job. President Obama, who seemed oblivious of the PATCO strike’s anniversary, was quick to join in the hypocritical scapegoating of the controllers.

“The individuals who are falling asleep on the job, that’s unacceptable,” Obama said in his trademark, finger-wagging style. “The fact is, when you’re responsible for the lives and safety of people up in the air, you better do your job. So, there’s an element of individual responsibility that has to be dealt with.”

The most significant case occurred on March 23, 2011, when American Airlines flight 1012 from Miami and United Airlines flight 628 from Chicago each requested permission to land at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. After repeated attempts to signal the control tower, the flights were forced to land unassisted. No one was hurt among the some 165 passengers and crew on the two flights. After this incident came to public attention, it was revealed that there had been a number of other cases of controllers dozing off over the previous year.

Obama did not consider the fact that the controllers might have been overworked. But a contemporary study by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) found that 61 percent of air traffic controllers had

work schedules that “opposed normal sleep-wake patterns.” One media account at the time summarized a typical week in the life of an air traffic controller: “A schedule may look like this: The first day, a 3 pm shift start; the second day, a 2 pm start; the third day, 7 am; the fourth day, 6 am. The worker may return to work a fifth shift at 10 pm on the fourth day to get a longer weekend, the board said.”

The understaffing has continued to the present. The NATCA, which functions primarily as a lobbying organization, reports severe staff shortages in American air control towers. In 2019, it said that the professional category of Certified Professional Controller (CPC) was at a thirty-year low.

The FAA, for its part, says that 14,000 air traffic controllers are at work in the US—still less than in 1981. The difficulty of learning the profession means that many students never complete FAA Academy training or quit after a short period on the job. The NATCA reports that controllers “at the most critically-understaffed facilities are forced to work mandatory overtime in order to maintain current capacity.”

Conclusion

The PATCO strike announced the definitive end of the period of relative class compromise and social reform that had prevailed in the US and other advanced industrial countries since the end of World War II. From that moment on, the capitalist class has carried out a relentless offensive to roll back the gains the working class realized over decades of struggle.

As the Workers League Political Committee explained just 10 days into the PATCO strike in a statement published in the *Bulletin* titled “The PATCO Strike: A Warning to the Working Class:”

The strike by 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization is a historical turning point for the struggle of the working class in the United States and internationally. It is the first major political confrontation between the American working class and the government.

After decades in which the class struggle in America was either denied entirely or minimized, in which the American worker was depicted as having become the middle class, in which America was held up as the great exception in a world in revolutionary ferment, the PATCO strike has exploded all these myths.

The air controllers’ strike has demonstrated that underneath the appearance of political stability and conservatism, the most insoluble social and economic contradictions of any capitalist country have been building up...

At the same time, the mask of democracy and government “of the people, by the people and for the people” is being stripped off, and the capitalist state is revealing itself for what it is: an instrument of oppression of the masses in the interests of a tiny handful of billionaires.

Workers are thrown in jail, bound hand and foot with chains; their union is decertified for doing what 95 percent of the members voted to do; punitive fines have been levied aimed at confiscating all the assets of the union and handing them over to the government or the airlines; FBI agents and federal marshals monitor picket lines and visit workers in their homes to intimidate them and their families.

One political conclusion above all must be drawn from the PATCO strike: far from being an aberration or exception, it reveals the real essence of class relations in the United States.

The ruling class is attacking all the basic rights of workers—social services, jobs, safety regulations, living standards, and now the right to union organization—and calling upon the repressive powers and violence of the capitalist state to enforce these attacks.

The ruling class relies on the trade union bureaucrats to sabotage the fight of the working class against the government. This sabotage takes the form, not only of open strikebreaking as in the air traffic controllers’ struggle, but most of all keeping the working class politically disenfranchised by supporting the capitalist two-party system.

The unions and all the old nationally based organizations of the working class have played the critical role in this social retrogression. The AFL-CIO’s complicity with the Reagan administration and its rejection of popular rank-and-file demands for broadening the PATCO struggle set the pattern for all the US labor struggles in the 1980s and 1990s. In case after case, the unions isolated, betrayed and helped defeat strikes, in spite of bitter working class resistance.

The same process unfolded all over the world, perhaps most similarly in the United Kingdom, where in 1985 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) looked on as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher crushed the coalminers, setting the stage for the destruction of industries and working class living standards.

Everywhere, the old Labor and Social Democratic parties completely embraced the demands of the financiers and helped line the pockets of the rich by impoverishing workers. In Africa, Latin America and Asia, the old national liberation movements followed the same path, scrapping import-substitution plans and nationalized industry and competing with each other over who could provide imperialism with the cheapest labor and the most lucrative natural resources of “their” people.

The most far-reaching example of this sea-change took place in the Soviet Union. As Leon Trotsky had warned more than 50 years earlier, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the end dismantled the property relations established by the October 1917 Revolution, converting itself into a new capitalist ruling class.

The tie that binds these processes is the transformation of nationally based labor bureaucracies and political parties from formations that, within narrow and historically defined limits, defended the interests of workers, into open instruments of class oppression. Underlying this, in turn, was the unprecedented global integration of production, which intensified the contradiction between the global economy and the nation state and rendered all nationalist programs impotent and reactionary.

In the US, the official unions consciously responded to the decline in the world economic position of American capitalism by offering their services to the corporate-financial elite, collaborating in the drive to make American corporations globally competitive at the direct expense of the jobs, wages and working conditions of US workers.

By the beginning of the 1990s, the unions could no longer be considered in any genuine way to be workers’ organizations, even in a limited defensive sense. Drawing out the implications of the collapse of the trade unions and the final counterrevolutionary betrayal by the Soviet bureaucracy, the Workers League and its co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) made the decision in the 1990s to transform their organizations from leagues to parties. It was the turn of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, to fight directly for the leadership of the working class.

Drawing on the lessons of history and an objective analysis of the actual position of the unions in global political economy, the ICFI was able to foresee that a new movement of the working class would emerge, and that it would of necessity come into conflict with the union apparatuses

wherever they still existed. The initial form this would take, the ICFI also predicted, would be a rank-and-file rebellion.

In April of 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the initiative for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. “The IWA-RFC,” it wrote, “will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

The formation of the IWA-RFC has already been vindicated in the course of struggle, most notably by the New River Valley strike of Volvo Trucks workers, 40 years after PATCO. Workers in Dublin, Virginia formed a rank-and-file committee that defeated three contracts and carried forward two strikes. The workers turned to the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* for support. They won backing from auto workers throughout the US and internationally—including powerful expressions of solidarity from Belgian Volvo workers.

The UAW and Volvo found a reprieve through the expedient of some combination of ballot fraud and blackmail in a second vote on the already rejected third contract. But this is a reprieve only. The crisis of capitalism is much more powerful than the dirty tricks of the union bureaucracy and its corporate bedfellows. The strike against Volvo has shown a way forward along the path of independent working class struggle and international solidarity.

As the ICFI wrote in its statement, *Forward to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!*

The fight against the pandemic, and against war, inequality, exploitation and dictatorship, is a fight against the entire capitalist social and economic order. Workers of all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the oligarchs, and establish a socialist society based on the rational, scientific and democratic control of production.

Concluded

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Footnotes

[1] Bensman, David, and Roberta Lynch. *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989: 3.

[2] Reich, Robert B, and John D Donahue. *New Deals: The Chrysler Revival and the American System*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986: 260.

[3] Galenson, Walter. *The American Labor Movement, 1955-1995*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996: 134.

[4] Minchin, Timothy J. *Labor under Fire: A History of the AFL-CIO since 1979*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017: 70.

[5] Nordlund, Willis J. *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Controllers' Strike*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998: 114.

[6] Troy, Leo, and Neil Sheflin. *U.S. Union Sourcebook: Membership, Finances, Structure, Directory*, 1985: 4.1-4.32.

[7] Minchin, *Labor under Fire*: 68.

[8] Nordlund, *Silent Skies*: 59.



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