What's behind the US air traffic controller labor shortages

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On August 15, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a travel warning to passengers that flights to and from airports in New York City could be delayed on the ground for up to two hours, due to staffing shortages among air traffic controllers. An FAA advisory said these delays were expected between 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. ET.

The national airlines, as major for-profit businesses eager to avoid blame, often point to air traffic controller staffing and other issues to excuse flight delays caused by their own operations or inclement weather. Flight tracking website FlightAware shows that 48,000 flights in the United States were canceled between May 27 and August 14, which is 2.3 percent of all scheduled flights. During the same period, almost 483,000 flights were delayed, which is 24 percent of all scheduled flights.

Summer thunderstorms in the Midwest and on the East Coast always play a part in flight delays and cancellations, but do not account for the sheer number of flight scheduling disruptions occurring now. Last week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a CNN interview that weather delays "shouldn't have created the kind of ripple effect through the system that it did." Buttigieg went on to say, "That is something that, to me, is an indication that we still have not seen the improvements that we need, that the system is very brittle."

In reality, the New York City delays expose a massive staffing crisis among air traffic controllers, which had been building for years but has been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic.

The FAA claims that its hiring goals are on target to match traffic volume. However, National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) President Rich Santa spoke at an aviation conference in early August, saying: "In 2011, there were over 11,750 Certified Professional Controllers [CPCs] and additional trainees yielding over 15,000 total controllers on board at the FAA. By the beginning of 2022, there were more than 1,000 fewer fully certified controllers, and 1,500 fewer controllers on board, a number that has declined for at least the past 11 years."

Santa concluded: "Unfortunately, FAA staffing is not keeping up with attrition. With the introduction of new technology and new entrants into the NAS [National Airspace System], we should have 1,000 more controllers, not 1,000 fewer than we had a decade ago."

The FAA is hiring for 1,500 air traffic controller positions in 2022, and received more than 57,000 applicants for those jobs. However, applicants are put through a labyrinthine weed-out process at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center "Academy" in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma before being sent to the destination facilities where the FAA determines trainees are needed.

Applicants are not able to choose where they are sent, and are often sent away from their families and lives only to put in for transfer once training is complete after approximately three years of training. This only exacerbates the staffing crisis since these trainees who were sent to places where they do not want to live will have to be retrained for months once, or if, they manage to transfer to a facility near their families.

Many of these trainees are "washed out" or failed at one step or another in the years-long training process, so 1,500 open positions never even nearly equal 1,500 filled CPC positions in the end.

The FAA, and everyone else in the US aviation industry, have held as common knowledge for over 40 years that a staffing crisis was in the wings. After Ronald Reagan fired 11,345 striking air traffic controllers in 1981, the FAA had to massively rehire to regain a functioning NAS. Because of this, it was well-known that a huge number of controllers would retire or otherwise leave the workforce within a few years of each other.

Air traffic control, like firefighting and some other similar jobs, require that their workers retire by age 56 because of the biological stresses of the job and also the high level of reaction time and cognitive abilities required. These abilities deteriorate with age while being somewhat compensated for by experience for awhile. Despite this toll on workers' health and abilities, the FAA has been known to issue many

exemptions to the age rule to help cover for declining staffing numbers, which also degrades the edges of the safety margins put in place after air disasters of the past.

This age-out requirement is precisely why the staffing crisis was predicted decades ago, and yet the FAA failed to act to preempt it. The FAA is not the only one to blame, as NATCA, the union which replaced PATCO after it was smashed, obviously knew about the crisis all along, yet lamely went along with the agency's hiring plan in the name of "collaboration."

While the airlines point the finger at the FAA, they are also responsible for the staffing crisis. US carriers were given massive bailouts under the CARES Act in 2020, ostensibly meant to help companies retain workers and pay them during a time of lost revenue due to the pandemic. However, US airlines took the money and then laid off a large percentage of their workforce as "unnecessary" during the low flight volume phase of the ongoing pandemic, where many potential passengers either were prevented from flying as usual or decided against flying due to the risk of infection.

Airlines for America (A4A), an aviation industry group, sent a letter to Congress in June laying the blame for delays and cancellations at the FAA's feet alone. A4A stated in the letter: "Specifically, air carriers are taking great care to reduce their summer flight schedules while also accelerating efforts to hire and train new employees to meet the strong resurgence in travel demand. The FAA must also work to ensure that the air traffic control system is capable of meeting demand."

The FAA responded to this accusation by saying, "Airline data show that the vast majority of delays are not due to air traffic controller staffing. Where demand has increased, the FAA is adding additional controllers."

There are many other reasons for the labor shortage. Many, if not most, air traffic control facilities today are forcing mandatory overtime six-day workweeks. Air traffic controller work schedules are usually horrendous "rattler" schedules, so-called because, like the rattlesnake, they "turn around and bite back." These schedules typically start with two or three second shifts (called "swings" in the industry), a "quick turn" to two or three first (or "day") shifts, and ending with a third (or "mid") shift. These schedules completely contradict the FAA's claims of combating rampant fatigue in its workers, but are popular with the agency because familiarity with different shifts makes plugging in an overtime worker into any variety of shift an easier prospect.

Another problem with hiring new recruits is the eroding pay. When applicants are hired, they often start at around $31,000, even in expensive metropolitan areas where most of the high-level Air Route Traffic Control Centers

(ARTCCs) exist. Trainees then proceed through years of training, stepping up their pay occasionally along the way. At the end of training, workers can expect a median annual salary of $138,556 (2021), but usually much less for lower-level facilities. After working for years in training, a controller can expect as little as $63,000 per year for a low-level facility that they were sent to often against their will.

These salaries are being eroded by at least 9 percent inflation, and like most jobs, pay is not keeping up. Earlier this year, NATCA accepted without hesitation or complaint a five-year contract extension that locked controllers into below-inflation annual pay increases, to say nothing of declining real wages for years before the pandemic.

Many controllers believed at the time that this five-year extension would likely put the next negotiations under a more hostile administration. The union then congratulated themselves in a newsletter to its members during a rare leadership change, where the incoming President Rich Santa was essentially hand-picked to replace outgoing Paul Rinaldi, who had held the position of union president for almost 13 years. A further insult was thrown at workers as NATCA then requested donations of thanks for the outgoing Rinaldi and VP Trish Gilbert, who both made approximately $340,000 in total compensation in 2019.

In order to solve the staffing crisis, air traffic controllers confront not only the FAA, but the pro-business union. To fight back, they need their own independent organizations to use the power they hold in the transit and logistics industry to win their demands. In particular, these demands should include pay that keeps pace with inflation, scheduling that prevents fatigue and other negative health impacts including higher risk of infection from COVID-19, and adequate staffing unhampered by bureaucratic obstacles like stationing controllers unwillingly in places they do not want to be.

Air traffic controllers should follow the examples of autoworkers, teachers, health care workers and railroaders and form independent rank-and-file committees, to prepare themselves to fight against both NATCA and the FAA, which allow the for-profit corporate airlines to run roughshod over public workers' rights while blaming controllers for delays and cancellations.

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