

Labor shortages among air traffic controllers threatens airline safety

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Are you an air traffic controller? Tell us what your working conditions are like. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A recent slew of mistakes and near-misses has finally received the public attention of officials in the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Aviation safety experts and industry union representatives reported to the United States Senate Subcommittee on Aviation Safety on November 9 that a shortage of air traffic controllers has led to increased fatigue and distraction, in turn contributing to an increase in close calls this year.

Jennifer Homendy, the chair of the National Safety Transportation Board (NTSB), said that aviation safety is “showing clear signs of strain that we cannot ignore.”

“Air traffic controllers are being required to do mandatory overtime,” Homendy testified at the Senate hearing. “It ends up leading to fatigue and distraction, which is exactly what we’re seeing as part of these incident investigations. And it all just comes down to the shortage of staffing.”

Rich Santa, the President of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), told the subcommittee that mandatory overtime is routine, including 6 day workweeks and 10 hour shifts. “It’s unsustainable,” he said. “The answer is not continuing to burden us with more fatigue, and continuing to burden us with more effort and work. It’s hiring the right amount of controllers” so that the facilities are adequately staffed.

Air travel dropped sharply in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary, necessary lockdowns that ensued. During this time, the FAA halted hiring and closed the sole training academy in Oklahoma City. Academy graduates and trainees in FAA facilities nationwide were told to stay home as their training was suspended. In short, the training pipeline was blocked, and no new controllers were being certified while many controllers took the opportunity to retire instead of being forced to work in unsafe facilities during a pandemic where little was being done to protect workers from deadly infection.

Passenger flights rebounded in 2022 when the last of the meager measures protecting against the pandemic were swept away in the name of protecting “the economy.” The FAA was then faced with an instant staffing crisis, prepared by decades of down-to-the-wire hiring practices.

called a safety summit March 2023. Safety experts from US air carriers, airports, air traffic control, and trade unions. These groups were asked to look at the recent problems with “fresh eyes.” But everyone in the aviation industry has known for decades about the chronic staffing crisis with FAA air traffic controllers.

When Ronald Reagan fired 11,345 striking air traffic controllers in 1981 as part of its crushing the PATCO strike (the NATCA, formed among the scab controllers, replaced PATCO as the air traffic controllers’ union after the strike), the FAA had to rapidly hire new controllers within a few months and years in order to recover a high level of safety in the airspace. As a consequence, massive numbers of air traffic controllers were projected to retire later at nearly the same time.

Air traffic controllers, like firefighters and other highly stressed safety workers, are required to retire by the age of 56 due to biological stresses of the job and the decrease in reaction time and cognitive abilities that come with age. Despite this, the FAA has been known to issue exemptions to allow some workers to work past mandatory retirement age, which has the effect of eroding the margin of safety.

This age-out requirement and the consequences for staffing are well-known, but the FAA has repeatedly failed to act to prevent the looming crisis that now stands before them. The National Air Traffic Controller Association (NATCA) has also long-known about this perpetual staffing crisis. Despite posing as an organization that staunchly defends its membership and the flying public against the grinding wheels of an incompetent FAA bureaucracy, NATCA has also failed to organize its membership to fight for a solution to the staffing and safety problems. Instead, NATCA has gamely gone along with the agency’s hiring plans for years, insisting to its membership that the union has no power over the hiring process.

The Chief Operating Officer of the FAA’s Air Traffic Organization (ATO), Tim Arel, said that the FAA is working to “hire, train and certify as many controllers as possible. While we have a long way to go, many of the facilities are much healthier than they were previously.”

Senator Ted Cruz, the ranking Republican of the Senate Commerce Committee, asked Arel if a second academy location might help to train more controllers. “At this rate, it

would take years for the FAA to hire enough controllers to meet the need,” Cruz said.

“The greatest challenge is not the physical space” at the academy, said Arel. “It’s the number of retired controllers, either military or FAA, that are available to provide instruction,” and are willing to relocate to Oklahoma City to work as instructors.

Air traffic staffing is a snowballing problem where controllers retire as early as possible because of the poor working conditions, and few are willing to relocate away from home to Oklahoma City upon retirement for lower pay and worse working conditions. The academy thus becomes a choke point in the hiring process where the FAA is unwilling to change their process or offer more pay to attract qualified instructors.

College graduates of the Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI), a program that has languished from official disdain and union betrayals on subjects like seniority, are expected to soon be hired and sent directly to their facilities for training. CTI graduates have already received basic air traffic training at their accredited colleges, so it is seen as a shortcut for the FAA, who only now sees it that way because they are in a crisis of their own making.

“Our nation is experiencing an aviation safety crisis,” said Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL). “Near-misses are happening way too frequently, and I refuse to be complacent in waiting to act until the next runway incursion becomes a fatal collision.”

These protestations from both capitalist parties do nothing to address the issues facing controllers themselves, however.

Applicants are not able to choose for themselves where they are sent after graduating from the academy. They are sent where they are needed most, which is often away from their homes, family, and friends with almost zero chance to transfer back home for many years, if ever.

Once hired and trained, controllers are expected to work 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, a “quick turn” to two first shifts with only 9 hours between shifts for commuting, eating, and sleeping, ending with a quick turn to a third shift overnight with only 8 hours between shifts.

The existence of these shifts completely exposes the illegitimacy of the FAA’s claims of reducing fatigue and stress in their workforce, but are popular with the agency because it requires fewer controllers to cover busy shifts and allows management to plug in overtime workers into any variety of shift with minimal retraining.

Compounding all of these problems that make the job less attractive to possible qualified applicants is the eroding pay. New controllers-in-training often start at around \$31,000, even in expensive metropolitan areas where most of the highest level facilities exist. Trainees then go through years of training, stepping up their pay along the way. At the end of training,

controllers can expect a median annual salary of \$138,556 (in 2021), but it is usually much less in lower-level facilities. Many controllers can expect as little as \$63,000 per year after training in a low-level facility that they were often sent to against their wishes.

Controller pay has been eroded by high inflation, which wage increases under the NATCA contract have not been keeping up with for years. Last year, NATCA accepted, without informing its membership first, a five-year extension to the current contract. This contract extension locks controllers into below-inflation annual pay increases and does nothing to negate years of declining real wages before the pandemic. Many controllers at the time were outraged that this extension could push the next negotiations into an even more hostile administration, as well as continuing the decrease in their standard of living.

The experience of the NATCA bureaucrats could not be more different than that of their membership. A union newsletter was issued to the membership congratulating NATCA on the successful sellout. This newsletter was how most rank-and-file workers even found out about the extension.

The staffing crisis is a symptom of the need for this struggle and cannot be solved without facing off with both the FAA and the pro-corporate union, NATCA. The FAA refuses to arrange better scheduling for its workers while NATCA acts as the agency’s apologist, telling their membership how impossible it is for them to acquire what is rightfully theirs and aiding the FAA in maintaining the operation at the cost of workers’ health and well-being.

Controllers are not alone, however. Air traffic workers have as their natural allies the pilots and flight attendants who need a safe airspace system, as well as other industry workers and workers in other industries who are fighting the same struggle against their employers and bureaucracies.

The demand for adequate staffing goes hand-in-hand with demands for pay that keeps up with inflation, scheduling that prevents unnecessary fatigue, protection from infection in the workplace with COVID-19 and other illnesses, and not forcing workers to locations where they do not want to be.

Air traffic controllers should join autoworkers, teachers, health care workers, railroaders, and workers in other industries in forming their own independent organizations outside of the control of the FAA and pro-corporate NATCA. Only in that way can decisions be made democratically and for the benefit of controllers themselves. The very safety of the National Airspace System relies on controllers winning on these issues.



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