

Two crashes put the crisis of air traffic controller staffing in the spotlight

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Two aviation disasters in three days have once again brought abysmal air traffic controller staffing under public scrutiny. On January 29, a US Army Black Hawk helicopter collided with an American Airlines passenger jet over Washington National airport in Washington D.C., claiming 67 lives. Also, on January 31, a medical transport jet crashed with a massive explosion in northeast Philadelphia killing seven people including a child and wounding 19.

The lengthy National Safety Transportation Board (NTSB) investigation process regarding these two accidents have just begun, but the initial reports have confirmed the unsafe character of the air traffic control that the WWSW has warned about for years.

In 2023, Jennifer Homendy, the chair of the NTSB, reported a work environment where mandatory overtime causes chronic fatigue and distraction. She said that aviation safety is “showing clear signs of strain that we cannot ignore.”

At the same subcommittee hearing in 2023, then-President of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) Rich Santa said it was routine to have mandatory overtime including six-day workweeks and 10-hour shifts. “It’s unsustainable,” he said. “The answer is not continuing to burden us with more effort and work. It’s hiring the right amount of controllers” so facilities are adequately staffed.

The union official was ousted as NATCA president in the national election in October 2024 due to worker anger over many issues, including staffing, pay, benefits and a lack of transparency and democracy in the union.

An example of the anti-democratic nature of the union bureaucracy can be found in the contract extensions that have been rammed through without consent of the

workers. The NATCA contract with the FAA, currently called the Slate Book by controllers, was enacted in 2016 and has been extended twice by unilateral decree of union officials without any discussion or vote by the membership. This has locked controllers into appalling working conditions until 2029, a staggering 13 years of unaddressed worker grievances.

The early stages of the investigations in the Washington D.C. and Philadelphia crashes have not suggested any controller involvement, but staffing, aging equipment and talent retention will definitely be seen on the final NTSB reports as contributing factors.

The fact that it is too early to accurately assign any cause or fault has not stopped President Trump from denouncing air traffic controllers for the accident at DCA. In a press conference on Thursday, Trump unleashed a racist political attack upon air traffic control workers, placing responsibility for the deaths on controllers. Claiming “common sense” for his views, Trump blamed “diversity, equity and inclusion” policies for hiring workers who are not “competent” to do the job of keeping aircraft safe.

Controllers can only be expected to do so much when a lack of federal support has caused them to languish in highly stressful jobs with onerous scheduling and poor staffing for decades. Fatigue due to overwork and poor management has been a known problem for years, all the way back to the PATCO strike in 1981 and beyond. Many of the demands over which PATCO walked out are the same today, including a shorter workweek, higher wages and increased staffing.

DCA tower is one of the worse examples. It was reported Wednesday night that the tower had one person doing the job of two people due to staffing. In fact, this has been the normal situation for most FAA air traffic facilities around the country for many years.

The most recent FAA data from September 2023 shows

that only about 70 percent of staffing targets were met by fully certified controllers in airport towers and terminal approach facilities like at DCA. Some towers at major airports like Philadelphia, Orlando, Austin, Albuquerque and Milwaukee had less than 60 percent of their staffing targets achieved. DCA's staffing was at about 63 percent.

Over 90 percent of US airport towers are short on air traffic personnel. Only about 2 percent of US towers met the Collaborative Resource Working Group's 2024 staffing targets for the number of necessary certified controllers. When including partially certified trainees, only 8 percent met the target. None of the larger regional centers which control "en route" aircraft between airports had enough fully certified controllers to meet the targets.

The FAA has struggled to hire and retain air traffic controllers for decades, but the problem was exacerbated in 2020 when necessary lockdowns for the COVID-19 pandemic caused the air traffic training academy in Oklahoma City to temporarily shut its doors.

Air traffic controllers, along with other highly stressed safety jobs like firefighters, are required to retire by the age of 56 due to the physiological stresses of the job and the decreased reaction time and cognitive abilities that come with age.

This mandatory retirement age, combined with the lengthy training process at the beginning, makes the staffing level fairly predictable and difficult to change quickly. Everyone in the aviation industry has known about control tower staffing problems for years. Nevertheless, the FAA has repeatedly refused to act, and NATCA's collaborationist relationship with the federal agency and the airlines has made it a junior partner in maintaining the status quo.

Staffing at air traffic facilities has become a "snowballing" problem because controllers retire as early as possible due to poor working conditions and pay, and an inadequate number of successful applicants ever reach full certification due to the difficulty of the job. In 2022, around 57,000 people applied for an FAA air traffic control job, but only 2,400 qualified to be hired. Of those 2,400, only 1,000 made it to day one of training.

Chris Wilbanks, FAA deputy vice president of safety and technical training, said that about 72 percent make it through the academy and then approximately 60 percent of those will become fully certified. The training process lasts about three to four years from the date of hire, depending on the facility and the difficulty level. All air traffic applicants must be hired before their 31st birthday in order to squeeze enough years of work out of them

before the mandatory retirement age of 56.

Adding to the problem, controllers are sent where the FAA needs the most bodies, not where they want to live and work and not necessarily where they would make the best fit. This policy often sends workers away from their homes, friends and families for many years, with some facilities being nearly impossible to transfer out of due to retirements or resignations.

The retention of talented controllers has been hard hit with the decrease of real wages due to rampant inflation and the rising cost of living, especially in the large metropolitan areas where most ATC facilities are located.

The struggle for adequate staffing is intimately tied with the fight for better wages and better equipment, a fight that has lasted for decades. Controllers will find themselves fighting not only against the FAA and the capitalist forces that drive their "race to the bottom" on these issues, but workers will also be fighting against a collaborationist union that fights for the interests of their bureaucracy rather than those of their membership.

Workers should join autoworkers, teachers, health care workers, railroaders and workers from other industries in forming their own independent rank-and-file organizations outside of the control of the FAA and NATCA. Only then will democratic transparency and decision-making make it possible to wage the necessary fight to win the demands that correspond to the real interests of controllers, in-flight personnel, ground crew and all other air transportation workers, as well as ensuring the safety of all those who use the air travel system.



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