

DOGE layoffs hit air transportation safety hard

Claude Delphian
2 March 2025

Trump's Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy announced an air traffic control "hiring supercharge" Thursday, set to begin immediately. The announcement came after Duffy toured the FAA training academy in Oklahoma City and spoke with trainees about the importance of safety in the National Airspace System (NAS).

The hiring wave coincides with the Trump administration's mass layoffs of federal workers across many federal agencies. Although none of the chronically short-staffed air traffic controllers have yet been fired, the cuts have already hit FAA staff that support their safety-critical functions.

Approximately 400 workers were fired starting on Friday. There is no clear picture yet of who was let go, since the layoffs have been done outside of the normal procedure, largely ignoring the FAA management structure which normally conducts hiring and firing, while the workers receive their terminations by email.

The terminations are being carried out by the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), headed by Elon Musk, the world's richest man. DOGE has almost no knowledge or experience with the agencies they are cutting, but that makes little difference to their mission. DOGE, with the blessing of Trump and headed by Musk, is waging a war on federal workers. If an agency like the FAA is imploded and lives are lost as a result, the ruling class would eagerly privatize that agency's functions.

The Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS) union reports 132 terminations of workers still in their probationary period and thus still contractually vulnerable to terminations. PASS, which represents FAA infrastructure and safety workers, reports that many of the fired workers were aviation safety assistants, maintenance mechanics and nautical information specialists.

Some of the fired workers were part of the FAA's Air Traffic Organization en route charting group, which maintains and updates Enroute Navigation Charts used in the NAS and relied upon daily by regional en route controllers across the country.

Eighteen air traffic control facilities lost maintenance mechanics, employees who work on electronic issues and other building repairs. Workers who didn't lose their jobs will also have their work interrupted, as radar technicians and other critical jobs could now be responsible for the additional duties once covered by their coworkers.

These are all the types of jobs that are tasked with assisting aircraft safety inspectors, repairing air traffic control facilities, and updating flight charts. Some of the workers would be in charge of

updating Washington D.C. airspace maps in the wake of January's midair crash, for example.

The en route charting group only has a handful of workers in the country who are trained in their jobs, which require specialized knowledge of FAA regulations, aviation safety, graphics and map design. It is a detail-oriented and demanding job that directly affects aviation safety in the United States.

"We have hundreds of changes every day across the country that need to be made," one terminated worker told WTOP about the navigational charts they worked on. The maps are updated daily so the pilots and controllers will have the most up-to-date information about navigation and safety.

"Say, you have to remove an airport that's no longer in operation. You might have to add airways to a busy airport that has their summer rush coming up. These are crucial and critical to what the air traffic controllers do for their routes and without maps they could not operate," the same employee said.

FAA administrator Sean Duffy claimed over the weekend that the eliminated positions were not "critical safety" jobs. "Safety has not been compromised" is an oft-used FAA public relations phrase. It has been heard so often after safety incidents that it has become somewhat of a common joke in control rooms across the country.

In reality, the government compromises safety in some bureaucratic and bone-headed manner fueled by the drive for private profits and hatred of public services. Such cuts are made in the interests of the ruling class which has a stranglehold on government institutions.

"We believe all of these employees are critical not only to the frontline safety workers, but to the entire aviation ecosystem," said Dave Spero, national president of PASS, which represents more than 11,000 FAA employees.

"All of these people are part of the safety net," said Spero. "The more of them that are not there, the more difficult it becomes to do the actual safety oversight."

Former FAA certified technician Philip Mann said that whether someone's position is deemed "critical to safety" can be determined by a superficial reason, such as whether the worker is authorized to perform a certified inspection of equipment. Although some of those who were fired were not able to perform the inspections themselves, they supported that work.

"It's a stretch, but that is usually where they can draw a line to say, 'If you can certify stuff, then you have a safety-critical job.

And if you don't certify stuff, you don't have a safety-critical job," Mann said. But the loss of that support staff "is going to have long-term safety implications—just work that simply can't be done," he said.

For airline safety inspectors, the aviation safety assistants who were fired "are like a paralegal to a lawyer," Spero said. They do the paperwork so the certified FAA inspector can focus on the airplane. There were 26 assistants cut, and each one typically supported 10 safety inspectors at a time. The paperwork will now likely fall to the inspectors themselves, increasing the workload and the time it takes to certify aircraft.

"They're not going to be able to do as much oversight of those industries as they were doing before," Spero said.

The FAA has been chronically short-staffed for decades, with federal officials raising concerns about the overtaxed and increasingly unsafe air traffic system.

Spero said a radar power outage at Chicago O'Hare International Airport last July caused a ground stop for airplanes there and at five surrounding airports served by the same Chicago TRACON facility. This was because air traffic controllers were no longer receiving accurate locations on airplanes. The situation took some time to resolve, largely because there was no technician on duty with the skills to fix the problem.

The FAA employs about 45,000 workers, of which approximately 14,000 are air traffic controllers. According to the FAA, it is currently short about 3,500 air traffic controllers, a difficult number to shore up without a decades-long effort. Short staffing has been an ongoing problem since before PATCO controllers went on strike over conditions and pay in 1981. When Reagan fired all 11,000 striking controllers, he created a generational exodus of controllers who would retire at the same time, and the FAA has been unwilling to replace their attrition with an adequate number of workers ever since.

The Trump administration earlier this year offered an ill-conceived buyout for veteran controllers, looking to cull their numbers as was being done to the other federal agencies. Later, Trump declared the offers invalid, likely deeming it a catastrophe for another day.

"As short-staffed as air traffic controllers are, there are about three air traffic controllers for every technician," Mann said.

Americans' confidence in air travel and federal agencies being capable of maintaining air safety has slipped in the aftermath of several air accidents and near-misses in recent months. A survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that only 64 percent of US adults say air travel is "very safe" or "somewhat safe," down from 71 percent in 2024. About 20 percent now think air transportation is very or somewhat unsafe, up from 12 percent last year.

Trust in federal agencies' ability to ensure safe air travel has dropped also. Only just over half of US adults have "a great deal" or "a moderate amount" of confidence in these agencies' ability to keep them safe in the air, down from about 60 percent in 2024.

In the past few weeks, FAA workers have been receiving emails from DOGE demanding they give a bullet-point list of five things they did for their jobs that week. Workers are being told to justify their jobs to DOGE or be terminated.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) union has predictably limited their response to this attack on their members to politically neutral advice to workers on what is safe to say in reply to this demand by DOGE. NATCA, the successor to PATCO after the latter was destroyed by Reagan, has a history rife with such political cowardice.

Neither NATCA nor PASS have acted in any significant way to protect the jobs of the workers they supposedly represent. Despite having the word on their lips with every communication to workers, there is no "solidarity" to be found in the unions.

Famously claiming workers are "unable" to go on strike, the unions use the Railway Labor Act that governs their ability to strike as cover for protecting the union bureaucracy's cushy positions and relationships with Capitol Hill and the White House. Instead of standing together and demanding their fired coworkers be reinstated and attacks on workers cease immediately, the unions only offer shoulder-side advice to workers. The unions remain publicly quiet about these attacks on workers and their safety ramifications to the flying public who would lose even more confidence in the ability of the airlines and federal agencies to keep them safe.

The unions' class orientation is not to the working class, their membership, but to the ruling class represented by bourgeois politicians in Washington D.C. and the airlines. This is why they remain frozen with inaction during a time of open political attacks on workers they are supposed to represent. Under the unions' "protection," workers will continue to be sacrificed to DOGE and other attacks in order to protect the union bureaucracy and its interests.

Workers need to realize that their own interests are not aligned with those of their unions. To wage this struggle and protect their jobs as well as the safety of the flying public, workers need to form their own organizations. Rank-and-file committees controlled democratically and directly by workers need to be formed in order to break with the duplicitous unions, share information and strategy, and wage the struggle in the only way that it can be won: with solidarity and action.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact