

Newark airport crisis highlights chronic air traffic controller shortage, antiquated equipment in US

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Over the last week a series of major operational disruptions hit Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, a critical hub in the metropolitan New York City area for national and international flights. Thousands of flights have been cancelled, delayed and diverted, with an arriving flight late by an average of four hours, according to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Newark Liberty is the twelfth-busiest airport in the US by number of passengers, with 24.3 million scheduled flights last year, and it is a major hub for United Airlines.

On Monday, it was widely reported that a mechanical breakdown—apparently the result of a burned-out copper wire—caused computer screens to go dark and air traffic controllers to lose any radar and communications contact with incoming and departing flights for roughly 90 seconds on April 28.

In a statement, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) said:

Air traffic controllers in Area C of the Philadelphia TRACON (PHL), who are responsible for separating and sequencing aircraft in and out of Newark Airport (EWR), temporarily lost radar and communications with the aircraft under their control, unable to see, hear, or talk to them.

In a statement, United Airlines CEO Kirby Scott claimed that over 20 percent of air traffic controllers at the airport “walked off the job” in response to the failures. NATCA officials denied a walkout took place, saying instead that five workers took 45-day trauma leave as a result of stress from the incidents.

The NATCA statement said:

Due to the event, the controllers took absence under the Federal Employees Compensation Act. ... This program covers all federal employees that are physically injured or experience a traumatic event on the job.

United CEO Kirby admitted that the Philadelphia TRACON “has

been chronically understaffed for years,” and added that “Newark airport cannot handle the number of planes that are scheduled to operate there in the weeks and months ahead.”

In a statement, the FAA confirmed that some controllers “have taken time off to recover from the stress of multiple recent outages,” acknowledging that “Our antiquated air traffic control system is affecting our workforce.”

The FAA claimed that Trump’s Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, a former Wisconsin Republican Congressman and Fox TV co-host who is demanding pay cuts for government employees, was dedicated to giving controllers the best technology possible.

The FAA statement added:

While we cannot quickly replace them due to this highly specialized profession, we continue to train controllers who will eventually be assigned to this busy airspace.

Last week’s crisis exposes how decades of understaffing and outdated equipment, exacerbated by the massive federal cuts under the Trump administration, have brought the US airline industry to the brink of disaster.

It follows several incidents, including the fatal collision between a civilian aircraft and military helicopter in Washington D.C. earlier this year.

The Department of Transportation has been hard-hit by the cuts enforced by billionaire Elon Musk and the “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE). Approximately 2,500 have already taken voluntary resignation offers and a major Reduction in Force (RIF, layoffs) is planned for the end of the month.

The cuts come as the transportation system already faces a critical shortage of nearly 3,000 air traffic controllers, according to Transportation Secretary Duffy. Even as cuts to other areas of the department continue full speed, Duffy has scrambled to take emergency measures to address the staffing gap, including pay incentives both for new hires and those who work past the mandatory retirement age.

However, as these are extremely highly skilled positions, it would take many years to close the gap—which has been building for decades—under the best of circumstances.

Last summer, the FAA made a contentious move that took Newark airspace from New York and moved responsibility to Philadelphia

controllers. This was an attempt to ease air traffic delays by freeing up staffing, though at least a dozen air traffic controllers were forced to uproot their lives and move to Philadelphia as a result. The other major airports in the New York City region, JFK and LaGuardia, are still worked by New York controllers.

In addition to the equipment failures and staffing issues at the Philadelphia air traffic facility, the FAA blames last week's Newark issues on the ongoing construction on one of Newark's runways, which limits flight capacity.

One of the three runways has been closed since April for routine construction, including repaving. The airport prepared for this loss of capacity by scheduling fewer flights for the duration of the project that is expected to finish in June.

United Airlines started to cut 35 out of its usual daily average of 328 round-trip flights last weekend. Newark is one of United's seven main hubs and handles most of the airline's flights to Europe, India and the Middle East.

In a press conference last week, Transportation Secretary Duffy called for more Americans to join the beleaguered and disgruntled ranks of current controllers in the US. Many controllers have retired as early as possible, attempted to get air traffic jobs in overseas locations such as Australia, or outright resigned in order to escape a system that is widely viewed by current controllers to be unbearable and unfixable after decades of mismanagement and maltreatment.

But warning signs extend back decades to before the 1981 PATCO strike, when an older generation of air traffic controllers was already demanding less onerous schedules and more pay. When Reagan fired all 11,000 striking controllers, which marked a turning point in the assault on the working class in the US, he set into motion an unprecedented churning of controllers. Strikebreakers, who were hired en masse, had to retire around the same time in cyclic perpetuity. This set up an obvious need to mass hire in advance of each wave of retirements, a goal the FAA has repeatedly failed to achieve.

Repeated calls for better wages and working conditions fell on deaf ears over the decades. Key responsibility in blocking a struggle lies with NATCA (National Air Traffic Controllers Association), the replacement union founded in the aftermath of the PATCO strike. At the ATX conference in 2024, NATCA's Special Counsel to the President Eugene Freedman told controllers and the world that workers were paid enough already. The union's last two national committees unilaterally extended the last contract without asking its membership, angering workers and causing many to abandon the union they feel betrayed them. NATCA officials are now praising Duffy.

This mirrors the actions of bureaucrats in unions across the federal government and transportation industry, who are dutifully upholding undemocratic bans on workers' right to strike even as the Trump administration violates every law possible in its attacks on the working class.

In March, the city letter carriers' union at the US Postal Service worked through binding arbitration to impose a contract nearly identical to the one which members had rejected by 70 percent. The postal unions are actively collaborating in a restructuring effort whose aim is to privatize the USPS entirely.

Although many air traffic controllers are paid six-figure incomes, many work in lower-paid facilities located in high cost-of-living urban areas and can barely make ends meet. Even the highest-paid controllers are feeling pain from skyrocketing costs for housing and food in the places they have to live to be near work. When long-term

short-staffing has been causing mandatory overtime for controllers, many are feeling like the profession is not worth the trouble anymore.

Controllers have been watching their colleagues in the airlines winning 30 percent raises—still not enough to combat rampant inflation and rising costs of living—and comparing it to their 1.5 percent yearly raises, which seem like a slap in the face to many.

Whatever the immediate circumstances, the events in Newark demonstrate that things are approaching a breaking point. Conditions in every industry will only worsen as a result of Trump's massive federal cuts, trade war tariffs, attacks on immigrant workers and drive to establish a presidential dictatorship.

This must be fought through an independent movement of the working class, rebelling against the Trump administration, his toothless opponents in the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Earlier this year, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) issued a call for emergency action to "stop the Trump-Musk purge of federal workers."

The IWA-RFC declared:

Trump's purge of federal workers goes far beyond PATCO. This is not just mass firings—it is an attempt to dismantle the civil service and eliminate social programs.

It concluded:

The IWA-RFC calls on federal workers to form rank-and-file committees independently of the union bureaucracies. These committees must unite with postal workers, autoworkers, Amazon workers, teachers, nurses and all sections of the working class to coordinate collective resistance.

The committees the IWA-RFC is calling for will be the means through which federal workers can communicate between workplaces, exchange information and coordinate joint action. Through the expansion of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, workers can build support and prepare strike action to oppose mass firings, the destruction of social programs and the privatization of public services.



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