

# 90 seconds of terror: Breakdown of air traffic controller systems at Newark airport points to system on the brink of collapse

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Last week, air traffic controllers responsible for Newark airspace at Philadelphia TRACON experienced the unthinkable. The equipment that controllers rely upon for making split-second decisions every minute of the day to keep air travelers safe suddenly died. Radar screens went dark and radios suddenly were silent.

For about 90 seconds, airliners and other aircraft hurtled through the airspace of one of the busiest airports in the US with no one watching the big picture or controlling the operation. Controllers sat helplessly, electronically blind and deaf, sitting in a windowless and dark control room. They did not know when or if their equipment would turn on again.

The pilots in the airspace have their own onboard tools, but were left to make their own decisions individually after several moments of confusion and unanswered questions to ATC on the radio frequency. In the absence of air traffic control in a busy airspace like Newark, the normal flow of instruction/query then response on the working frequency quickly devolves into pilots issuing statements about what they plan to do for other pilots to hear and respond to. Frequency congestion increases and many transmissions are “stepped on” by other transmissions so that neither are heard by anyone.

This equipment failure did not have a fatal result this time, but it illustrates the crumbling nature of the National Airspace System (NAS) in the United States. The NAS has been neglected by Congress and the FAA for decades. Small, mostly meaningless equipment “upgrades” came in the form of expensive contracts to companies like Raytheon and Orion Systems and have been mostly obsolete even before implementation.

In the largest facilities, the Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCC), the upgrade to ERAM from HOST, removed the old system as an important backup, leaving controllers with the unwieldy DARC/EBUS system from the 80s and 90s as an unsafe backup if the new system were to fail during a busy period.

Philadelphia TRACON controllers were already dealing with chronic short-staffing, like the entire US air traffic system has for decades. A few of the workers controlling Newark on the day of the equipment failure took “trauma leave” after being helpless in such a high stress job, with hundreds of lives on the line at any one point in time.

## Impact of DOGE

Chronic air traffic controller (ATC) staffing shortages are continuing amid mass job cuts at the Department of Transportation (DOT), which oversees the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The Trump Administration has deputized oligarch and ignoramus Elon

Musk and his so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to slash government spending to the bone. This has led to wrecking critical federal agencies that the American public relies upon daily.

After the mid-air collision of a passenger jet and a helicopter over the Potomac River in early 2025, Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy announced that DOGE would intervene with the FAA to “upgrade our aviation system.” Musk claimed his department would “make rapid safety upgrades to the air traffic control system.” DOGE began by firing hundreds of FAA safety workers on February 17.

Musk’s staff set up shop in the FAA’s Air Traffic System Command Center on February 17. Many of them are not old enough to rent a car and none of them have any expertise in the complexity, safeguards or history of the NAS. Duffy confirmed that Trump had put Musk’s personal staff in charge of America’s air traffic control systems.

Overworked and underpaid air traffic controllers in the US began having to weekly justify their jobs by sending an email to Musk’s staff with a list of tasks they performed during the last week. This added an insulting and useless job task to the already exhausted workforce.

## The legacy of PATCO

Staffing and other critical problems in the US ATC system date back over 45 years, to the time when an older generation of controllers were struggling with the same problems. The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) union was fighting for a substantial pay increase, reduced work hours, improved benefits and improved working conditions.

Controllers then were demanding a 32-hour work week with a four-day week and eight-hour days. Workers felt overwhelmed by their workload and lack of support from management, complaints that modern controllers will easily recognize as echoes of their own.

When PATCO went on strike in 1981, the Reagan administration decided to make an example of them. All 11,000 striking controllers were fired. This attack on air traffic workers opened a new stage of attacks on workers and the wholesale rollback of workers’ rights won from decades of struggle.

When PATCO controllers were fired and the union decertified, a mass wave of strikebreakers were hired to take their jobs. These strikebreakers formed the National Air Traffic Controller Association (NATCA) eight years later, in 1989. The new union promised to collaborate with the FAA in their mission and never again so much as threaten to strike.

The mass hiring also set into motion a new cycle of mass hiring and

mass retirements that continues to this day, with many controllers retiring at the same time due to mandatory safety age requirements. The FAA has repeatedly failed to hire enough controllers with each wave, keeping staffing at critical lows for decades.

Today, most US air traffic controllers are being forced into mandatory overtime, six-day work weeks or holdover overtime which can make 10-hour work days. Where PATCO went on strike to decrease hours and increase pay, NATCA has successfully prevented any meaningful work action from taking place to prevent conditions from getting even worse.

PATCO was a turning point because it signaled the end of the period of relative class compromise following World War II. Faced with a ruling class determined to claw back everything it ever gave up to workers, the union bureaucracy proved incapable of combining their nationalist, pro-capitalist policies with even a limited defense of workers' living standards. This outmoded program, which reflected the material interests of union bureaucrats, led them to decades of open collaboration in layoffs, wage stagnation and overwork, which continue to this day.

Indeed, Reagan was only able to get away with firing PATCO strikers because of assurances from the AFL-CIO bureaucrats that they would do nothing to defend them. Meanwhile, workers across the country demanded a general strike to force Reagan to back down, and hundreds of thousands flooded to Washington D.C. for a "Solidarity Day" protest.

This divergence of interests between the bureaucrats and the rank and file has only grown since. Today, this finds its outcome in the open support of top union officials for Trump and his trade war policies, including the Teamsters, the United Auto Workers and the dockworker unions. Others combine purely verbal opposition to the would-be dictator while focusing all their efforts at suppressing all organized opposition from below.

NATCA officials would do nothing to jeopardize the status of the union and their cushy positions in Washington D.C., where they rub shoulders with congresspeople and airline CEOs on Capitol Hill. Collaboration with FAA management, Congress and CEOs is a much better path to satisfy the interests of the union bureaucrats, but it does not help the rank-and-file controllers.

### **NATCA union collaborates as conditions reach the breaking point**

In 1981, there were approximately 17,000 air traffic controllers in the US who worked around 14,000 flights every day. Today there are about 10,600 certified professional controllers (CPCs) who work about 44,000 flights per day. The number of controllers today has decreased by a staggering 38 percent since the PATCO strike, while daily air traffic has increased 214 percent.

Air traffic controllers in the US are today fighting for the same demands that controllers did 45 years ago, only under even worse conditions than in 1981. The framework that federal workers labor under, particularly air traffic controllers, is designed to block resistance to sellout contracts which have brought conditions to this breaking point.

One controller told the WSWS: "I am being required to perform my duties with only two five-minute bathroom breaks. No lunch and no time to refresh to better move aircraft for safety. We are contractually required to have at least 15 minutes, with medical research and training urging a minimum of 40 minutes between times of continuously separating airplanes that do not exceed two hours. Doing less was shown to be cognitively worse than being drunk."

The controller concluded: "The public deserves us being able to focus on their safety at the best of our ability."

Conditions have worsened without even the fig leaf of contract talks. In

2006, George W. Bush imposed work rules on controllers in lieu of a legitimate contract. This "White Book" severely cut wages, especially for new controllers, and imposed things like a dress code and more control over the operation by management, among other things. When Obama was elected, a new contract with NATCA was approved in 2009. This "Crimson Book" never reached the level of pay and benefits that the earlier "Green Book" had in its provisions before the "White Book."

Yet NATCA praised this overall loss as a win, though the membership had been split into three pay tiers under the new contract.

More recently, NATCA national leadership unilaterally extended the current contract twice without approval from the membership, angering many workers. The so-called "Slate Book" was extended under the outgoing leadership of president Paul Rinaldi, although it was supported by the incoming president Rich Santa in the email announcement to the membership. The next extension occurred under current NATCA president Nick Daniels.

At a recent Washington lobby week, NATCA did not even bother to formally request pay increases. In another conference, Special Counsel to the President Eugene Freedman said controllers already make enough. Disgusted, many controllers have left the union, retired, resigned, or left to work air traffic in other countries in Europe or in Australia.

### **Workers want to fight back**

Controllers are looking for a way to fight for the respect and compensation due to their profession.

"This has gotten out of control," another controller told the WSWS. "NATCA is actively working against us at this point and has failed the controllers in a way that may be unrepairable. While ATC is a small group, we prop up a massive portion of the US economy. What other profession would cause such a disruption if we just decided not to show up for work for a day, hell, even a few hours would send the country into a tailspin (pun intended)."

Another controller said that he had refused "to fund the people actively taking down a once proud profession. I am not alone in these thoughts. This is the temperature of nearly the entire work force."

The struggle of rank-and-file air traffic controllers is therefore a struggle for public safety in the United States. The disruptions and delays caused by incidents like last week in Newark will only get worse unless a fight is waged by and for air traffic control workers. Summer weather patterns and increased air travel will only exacerbate staffing and equipment issues.

In order to wage an effective struggle against low wages, overwork and the low staffing that results, air traffic controllers need to form rank-and-file committees outside of the control of NATCA bureaucrats. They must appeal for support among fellow workers in the airline industry, federal workers and workers across the country and the world.

In a statement published in February, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees called for "mass meetings and demonstrations ... to prepare emergency strike action to stop the firings and the gutting of essential programs."

Rank-and-file committees, the statement explained, "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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