

Severe delays at Newark airport highlight the ongoing crisis of the US air traffic control system

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Flights to and from Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, one of the three major airports in the New York City metropolitan area, and one of the busiest in the country, suffered significant delays last Sunday, October 26, due to a severe shortage of air traffic controllers.

This is not a new situation, both at Newark and nationally. There is an already existing acute shortage of air traffic controllers in the US, a legacy of the Reagan administration's crushing of the PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization) strike in 1981, the blacklisting of strikers and subsequent attrition of the workforce. As a result, there are chronic delays and unsafe conditions at many US airports, which have led to multiple near disasters and at least two fatal crashes.

This situation is now being exacerbated by the federal government shutdown. Controllers are classified as "essential" and therefore required to work during the shutdown. Nevertheless, they are not among the limited categories of federal employees, including the military, for whom special arrangements are being made in order to continue paying wages. The controllers suffered their first "payless payday" on Tuesday, October 28.

Due to the understaffing, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced that on Sunday the air traffic control center with responsibility for Newark Airport experienced a staffing shortage. As a result, incoming flights were held at the airport of origin for an average of an hour and 22 minutes, while outgoing flights were delayed by an average of 26 minutes. A total of 348 flights were delayed and seven were cancelled at Newark on Friday.

Sean Duffy, US Secretary of Transportation,

attributed the shortage to an increase in the number of controllers calling in sick. The lack of adequate staffing is not isolated to Newark, airports across the country have already experienced similar problems. Also on Friday, delays were reported at airports in Phoenix, Houston and San Diego. The FAA has warned that similar conditions may occur at airports in the New York City area, Dallas and Philadelphia. Passengers have also experienced recent delays and cancellations at JFK and LaGuardia, the other two airports in the New York City metropolitan area.

Nationally, the number of flight delays reached a high of 6,158 last Thursday and has been close to 4,000 a day recently.

Air traffic control is an extremely stressful job. Controllers must maintain intense vigilance at all times to avoid catastrophic accidents in congested airspace. Conditions are made even more difficult by increasingly outdated equipment, lacking upgrades which have been neglected for years. This dangerous conjunction of factors was terrifyingly illustrated last May when a catastrophic failure of both radar and radios at the Philadelphia control facility, which since last year has had responsibility for Newark airspace, suddenly materialized. For 90 seconds air traffic control was completely blind and out of contact with the multitude of planes within its jurisdiction. Miraculously, no serious incidents occurred due to the emergency actions taken by pilots flying in the vicinity.

Control over Newark airspace was transferred to Philadelphia from New York last year due to chronic understaffing at the latter.

The pressures on air traffic controllers have been

compounded by the suspension of pay, due to the Federal government shutdown. With families to support and mortgages or rent to pay, the stress has become unbearable for increasing numbers of controllers, as acknowledged by Duffy. As a consequence, more and more are taking sick leave, making staff shortages even worse, due to the already inadequate numbers available, and resulting in the imposition of mandatory overtime.

The state of the US air traffic control system has been further degraded by the actions of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) which began by firing hundreds of FAA safety workers on February 17, without concern for the potentially deadly consequences.

The scale of the deterioration of conditions for current air traffic controllers is illustrated by a few figures. In 1981, on the eve of the PATCO strike, 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.

The current air traffic control workers' union, the National Air Traffic Controller Association (NATCA), was formed by those who scabbed on the PATCO strike eight years after Reagan fired more than 11,000 strikers who refused to surrender. NATCA has done nothing to ameliorate the conditions of the unpaid controllers many of whom have been forced to work mandatory overtime and six-day weeks well before the shutdown.

Three weeks ago, Duffy denounced controllers who did not come to work as “problem children” and threatened to fire them. Duffy told Fox Business, “if we have some on our staff that aren’t dedicated like we need, we’re going to let them go. I can’t have people not showing up for work.”

Far from denouncing these threats, NATCA officials issued a statement warning its members that “participating in a job action could result in removal from federal service” and is “illegal.” As the WSWs commented at the time, “In the eyes of the labor bureaucracy, it is completely ‘legal’ to compel their members to work for nothing like slaves.”

Air traffic controllers and other federal workers must

take the conduct of this fight into their own hands, by building rank-and-file committees as new centers of organized resistance to the attack on jobs and essential social services. These committees must be controlled by the ranks themselves and operate independently of the federal government employees unions and the Democrats, who are carrying out impotent appeals to the courts and for a “bipartisan agreement” to restore government funding.

There is only one way to stop the drive to dictatorship: the full mobilization of the working class in collective action, including a general strike, to drive Trump and his fascist cabal from power. This industrial counter-offensive must be combined with a political struggle by the working class, which is aimed at establishing workers’ power, expropriating the oligarchy and establishing a socialist society based on meeting human need, not the enrichment of mega-billionaires and millionaires.

To join the fight to build rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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