

Four decades after PATCO strike, government shutdown worsens continual crisis facing US air traffic controllers

Claude Delphian
3 November 2025

Air traffic controllers in the United States have been working without pay for over a month during the federal shutdown. As “mission-critical” employees, certified controllers have been required to report to work while other government workers have been furloughed.

Controllers received a partial paycheck two weeks ago, but received their first zero dollar “paycheck” on October 28. Unable to continue working without pay for long, controllers will be forced to take leave or resign to find paying work.

Many controllers posted their \$0.00 paychecks on social media, questioning how much longer they can last without pay. Some who worked through the last shutdown six years ago described how the higher cost of living is leaving them in dire financial straits much sooner this time.

As air traffic controllers take leave to find paying work, slowdowns and ground stops have plagued US airports. On October 31, there were many “staffing triggers,” meaning a warning about possible shutdown of services due to staffing, in many airports across the US.

These included busy facilities such as I90 (Houston TRACON), ZNY (New York Center), BNA (Nashville), ZBW (Boston Center), A90 (Boston TRACON), ZID (Indianapolis Center), PHL (Philadelphia), DFW Tower (Dallas-Fort Worth), ZTL (Atlanta Center), ZDC (Washington Center), ZAU (Chicago Center), DEN Tower (Denver), ZHU (Houston Center), ZAB (Albuquerque Center), N90 (New York TRACON), A80 (Atlanta TRACON), PHX Tower (Phoenix), and P50 (Potomac TRACON).

There are three types of air traffic control facilities: the towers which most people are familiar with, Terminal Radar Approach Controls (TRACONs), and Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCCs). Towers, TRACONs, and ARTCCs are physically located in higher traffic areas, which also tend to correspond to expensive urban areas.

Many controllers, particularly those working at small and medium-sized towers, were already struggling to make ends

meet. Inflation and skyrocketing costs of living have quickly eroded paychecks that once were considered fairly decent.

The “Slate Book” contract between the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Air Traffic Controller Association (NATCA) union dictates a 1.5 percent raise for controllers each June. This has only barely met inflation for two years out of the last decade, not accounting for even steeper price increases in the urban areas where controllers must reside.

The aviation industry generates approximately \$4.1 trillion per year in global economic activity. With around 60,000 air traffic controllers internationally, this means each air traffic controller is on average responsible for safeguarding about \$68 million in economic activity. It is immediately clear why the federal government requires controllers to continue to report to work without pay.

But controllers only see a tiny fraction of the value they create. Air traffic controllers in the US make an average of around \$85,000, according to PayScale. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the lowest paid certified controllers make less than \$76,090 per year. Newly hired controllers can spend up to three years in training making significantly less.

FAA management is cracking down on sick leave usage during the shutdown, threatening workers with official action if they do not show up to work even for legitimate reasons. Normally, controllers are required to be at peak performance for each shift and are nominally encouraged to utilize sick leave liberally, even if the worker is simply fatigued. Due to the onerous “rattler” schedule imposed on controllers, fatigue is an oft-given reason for sick leave.

But now management threats are making workers second guess a decision to stay home when not feeling well. Controllers could receive a “sick leave abuse” letter that, if repeated, could lead to termination. Many are also afraid of being put into a “non-essential” status if they are deemed too ill to do their jobs. Being “non-essential” could result in

furlough and possibly no back pay when the federal government reopens.

Many controllers are being faced with a rapidly approaching decision to make. Do they continue to work their FAA job for the promise of later pay, take out loans to cover bills and hope for the best? Or do they use their accrued leave to go and find work that pays them now? Some controllers have already gotten a second job to make ends meet. When added to the weeks of mandatory overtime where controllers have been forced to work for 60 hours per week, this development exacerbates the critical fatigue workers were already experiencing.

Mandatory overtime began for most facilities over two years ago when the federal government and corporations attempted to resume normal operations following the COVID-19 lock-downs. The FAA was unable to operate the training academy in Oklahoma City during those times and facilities were able to run using skeleton crews of controllers during the traffic downturn of the pandemic.

When corporations and the federal government, for reasons of profit, resumed normal operations during the most severe phase of the pandemic, the FAA no longer had enough controllers to run the National Airspace System (NAS) and forced workers to work overtime every week. Some controllers welcomed the extra work to make up for falling real wages, but all controllers became more stressed and fatigued than before.

In a job that already made it hard for workers to see their families and make a life for themselves outside of work, those opportunities all but disappeared for the last few years.

NATCA, the air traffic control union, has spent most of its energies begging capitalist politicians to work “together” toward a compromise to reopen the government and resume paychecks to workers and therefore themselves. What this means is effectively endorsing the position of the Trump administration, which is demanding total surrender by the Democrats via a continuing resolution which continues all cuts imposed in the summer’s “Big Beautiful Bill.” An acceptable compromise to NATCA would mean massive cuts to social programs such as foods stamps and healthcare.

Instead of organizing the means for workers to defend themselves, NATCA is doing the FAA’s job for them by policing workers to ensure that they do not get out of line and start performing work actions on their own. Any suggestion that something more be done than wringing hands and passing out flyers at airport terminals is shut down immediately by the union.

FAA air traffic controllers are forbidden to strike by the combination of the anti-worker Taft-Hartley Act, Anti-Deficiency Act and the no-strike clause in the Federal Aviation Act. The Professional Air Traffic Controllers

Organization (PATCO) famously defied these laws in 1981 and went on strike.

In a well-planned provocation, president Ronald Reagan responded by firing all 11,000 striking controllers and decertifying the union. The AFL-CIO refused to defend PATCO with a general strike; this was a key point in the transition of the bureaucracy into open agents of management. NATCA was formed by strikebreakers and newly hired controllers six years later.

The National Airspace System did not recover from the PATCO firings until the late 1990s, only to be attacked again by George W. Bush a decade later. Despite the protestations of the FAA, safety most definitely was compromised during those years and afterwards as well.

The feckless NATCA bureaucrats are only able to look after their own interests and leave rank-and-file controllers to suffer the consequences. Controllers are continually told by their “representatives” that “now is not the time” and cite their unpopular collaborative efforts with FAA management and Congress.

But rank-and-file controllers have their own interests that will not be looked after by these bureaucrats. Workers want adequate pay and benefits, good working conditions and the ability to live a life outside of work. All of these worker rights are being denied to controllers currently.

Instead of relying on union bureaucrats, workers need to form their own organizations independent of the union structure. These rank-and-file committees can then have honest conversations about what to do without interference by those bureaucrats who are looking after themselves.

Only then can a genuine struggle be waged against the federal government that is abusing workers and eroding safety in order to use controllers as a political football in their attacks on the broader US working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact