

Trump threatens unpaid air traffic controllers: “Get back to work, now!”

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In a rant on his Truth Social platform Monday, President Trump openly threatened air traffic controllers who took time off during the government shutdown to work second jobs to feed their families—even as controllers have been forced to work six-day weeks, 10 hours a day without pay.

Trump demanded obedience and the punishment of those who refused to labor without wages, writing:

All Air Traffic Controllers must get back to work, NOW!!! Anyone who doesn't will be substantially “docked.” ... For those that did nothing but complain, and took time off, even though everyone knew they would be paid, IN FULL, shortly into the future, I am NOT HAPPY WITH YOU.

Trump added:

If you want to leave service in the near future, please do not hesitate to do so, with NO payment or severance of any kind! You will be quickly replaced by true Patriots, who will do a better job... REPORT TO WORK IMMEDIATELY.

This is a real threat to victimize air traffic controllers and impose a political loyalty test over who will keep their jobs. Any worker who expressed opposition to working like a slave for no wages, or who missed work to feed their families, could now face wage cuts or termination. Meanwhile, those who act as informers are promised bonuses.

Trump's remarks echoed the thuggish rhetoric of

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, who on October 9 threatened to fire a “small subset of controllers that don't show up,” denouncing them as “problem children.” Since then, however, administration officials have postured as sympathetic to controllers, feigning concern for unpaid and exhausted workers while accusing Democrats of creating “chaos” at airports.

The abrupt shift by Trump reflects concern over the rising popular hostility to his administration, which is starving 42 million Americans who rely on food assistance even as it constructs a White House ballroom for the financial oligarchy. Trump's concern is not the Democrats, who are preparing to strike a deal to fund his fascistic government, nor the trade union bureaucracy, which is working tirelessly to prevent any organized resistance by workers. What he fears is the growing radicalization of workers and young people and the danger of collective resistance by the working class to his fascist regime.

Air traffic controllers and all federal workers must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees to organize collective action, demand the immediate payment of wages, halt victimizations and defend essential social programs. This fight must be waged independently of the union apparatus.

At a press conference Monday, National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) President Nick Daniels—who has repeatedly threatened controllers that coordinated strikes, sickouts or other job actions are illegal—groveled before the administration. Daniels praised Transportation Secretary Duffy for efforts to “supercharge controller hiring and modernize the air traffic control system” and for his “support for air traffic controllers and for ending this shutdown.” At the same time, Daniels admitted the situation had reached a breaking point, with unpaid controllers “donating plasma”

and “driving Uber” to pay for gas, childcare and food. He warned that the added stress was endangering air safety.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has ordered airlines to reduce domestic flights at 40 major US airports, rising to 10 percent cuts this week, due to staffing shortages. On Monday alone, over 2,200 flights were canceled and more than 8,000 delayed. Airlines are losing roughly \$1 billion per week. Nearly half of US air freight travels in passenger aircraft, meaning the shutdown threatens to disrupt supply chains across the economy. Pressure from the airlines—lavishly bailed out by both parties at the beginning of the pandemic—is another factor behind the Democrats’ rush to a deal.

Even before the shutdown, the FAA was short at least 3,800 controllers due to retirements and recruitment failures. Now, federal officials acknowledge that 15 to 20 controllers a day are retiring—up from four—while trainees are quitting in large numbers.

These conditions recall 1981, when chronic understaffing, antiquated equipment and fatigue led to the PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization) strike. Reagan fired 11,000 striking controllers and smashed the union, blacklisting workers for life. NATCA, formed by strikebreakers, has enforced decades of declining pay and unbearable schedules.

Controllers have expressed their anger on social media. One wrote:

We don’t start at \$180k hell MOST of us will never see \$180k... More than 50% work 6 day work weeks... Our pay has NOT kept up with inflation and we have lost 34% of our buying power... We are committing suicide at alarming numbers... One mistake and you’ve killed many, many people... We keep this country running... We are overworked, underpaid and WAY underappreciated... people are starting to crack.

Another explained:

The sacrifices demanded... on our health, marriages, children... were once justified... Today, that equation no longer holds... Stagnant pay... slashed our buying power... Overtime... is now mandatory just to keep facilities operational... Standards at the academy have visibly declined...

Burnout is universal, morale is irreparably damaged.

Trump’s statements underscore the class nature of the shutdown and both corporate-controlled parties. Workers who oppose unpaid labor are treated as enemies, while those who demonstrate loyalty are rewarded. It is the logic of dictatorship.

Behind the scenes, both capitalist parties are negotiating to restore the operations of the state—not to protect working people but to ensure the continued functioning of Wall Street, the military-intelligence apparatus and the machinery of repression.

The working class must answer by forming rank-and-file committees, linking across federal agencies, workplaces and industries, and preparing collective action, including strikes. These committees must demand:

- **Immediate payment of all wages**
- **No retaliation against any worker**
- **Full staffing and humane schedules**
- **Safe, modern equipment under workers’ control**
- **Defend social programs—oppose all austerity**
- **End the ICE and military occupation of US cities**

The lessons of PATCO must be learned. In 1981, there was huge support for a general strike against Reagan’s unionbusting, but this was blocked by the AFL-CIO, paving the way for decades of corporate-government attacks and a historical decline in the social position of the working class. In the face of the turn of the ruling class to fascism and dictatorship, the union bureaucracy functions as an arm of the state against workers.

The defense of air traffic controllers is part of a broader struggle against authoritarianism, war and capitalist exploitation. Only the independent mobilization of the working class, organized in rank-and-file committees and fighting for a socialist reorganization of society, can secure democratic rights, safe working conditions and a future free from hunger, poverty and war.



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