FAA lowers hiring target by more than 2,000 for air traffic controllers

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The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced Friday it would reduce its staffing target for air traffic controllers by more than 2,000. The FAA's new Certified Professional Controller (CPC) target is 12,563—down from the previous goal of 14,633.

This reduction of force is being presented as a management achievement. It is nothing of the sort. It is a bureaucratic fraud, and it puts lives at risk.

CPC staffing sits at a 21st-century low of approximately 11,000—meaning the FAA cannot even meet its newly lowered bar. The new staffing target of 12,563 CPCs has not been achieved in 30 years. Even at the 21st century's high-water mark—approximately 11,753 CPCs in 2012—the system was considered understaffed relative to traffic volume.

Over 90 percent of US airport towers are already understaffed, and only about 2 percent of facilities met the Collaborative Resource Working Group's staffing targets for fully certified controllers as of 2024. Rather than confront this crisis honestly, the FAA has chosen to move the goalposts and declare partial victory.

The staffing crisis has its roots 45 years ago, when President Ronald Reagan fired over 11,000 striking air traffic controllers from the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). The crushing of the strike was a turning point in class relations in the United States and was followed by millions of layoffs over the course of the 1980s.

Reagan's mass firings created a generational staffing cliff, as replacement controllers hired en masse in the early 1980s were set to retire at the same time, and the FAA has been unwilling to replace their attrition with adequate numbers ever since.

In the summer of 1981, there were 13,348 air traffic controllers managing around 14,200 daily flights. Today, fewer than 11,000 CPCs manage over 44,000 daily flights. Technology has enabled some of this increase, but the human cost has been enormous.

More work, more fatigue, worse safety

The FAA's plan rests on a sleight of hand: treating "time on position" (TOP)—the number of hours a controller actively works traffic at a radar scope or in a tower cab—as an efficiency metric to be maximized rather than a fatigue variable to be carefully managed. A report by the National Academies of Sciences cited in the announcement found that average daily TOP has declined even as traffic volume grew by 4 percent. It recommends pushing controllers from just over 4 hours daily to 5 hours.

This is a dangerous logic. Air traffic control is an exercise in sustained, high-stakes cognitive labor. Unlike most professions, controllers cannot make mistakes—a moment's lapse in situational awareness, a delayed decision, a failure to visualize aircraft separation in three dimensions can result in a midair collision or a runway incursion with mass casualties. Rest periods are not productivity losses; they are built-in safety margins.

NASA's human factors research found that exhaustion is a contributing factor in up to 20 percent of all aircraft mishaps. The FAA's own research has found that working after 18 hours of wakefulness degrades cognitive performance to the equivalent of a 0.05 percent blood alcohol content—above the legal driving limit. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has directly linked chronic controller fatigue to a string of serious near-misses and fatal runway incursions.

The scheduling system already in use is known by controllers as the "rattler" because, as the saying goes, it "comes around and bites you" at the end of the week. A typical rattler schedule begins with two evening shifts, transitions through two-day shifts with as few as nine hours between them and ends with a late-night "mid" shift on only eight hours rest. The result, for a worker already carrying a mandatory overtime week, is a week-long accumulation of sleep debt that crashes down on the single day off they may have.

The FAA has long preferred this schedule not because it serves safety but because it requires fewer controllers to cover the same number of busy shifts.

The proposal to now modernize this already destructive system by pushing controllers harder is an acceleration of the same logic that has made the FAA progressively less safe for decades. The January 2025 midair collision near Reagan National Airport that killed 67 people, the ongoing near-misses and runway incursions being tracked by the NTSB, the 90-second radar blackout last year at Newark that left controllers blind, are warnings that lowering staffing targets will have deadly consequences.

Overtime pay costs: a sign of overwork

The National Academy of Sciences notes that overtime costs for air traffic controllers jumped more than 300 percent since 2013, now

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exceeding $200 million annually. The report attributes this to "misallocated workforce and inefficient scheduling."

In reality, overtime costs have exploded because the FAA has chronically refused to hire and retain an adequate number of controllers. The report's framing allows the FAA to pathologize the symptom and ignore the disease.

The training pipeline bottleneck has been extensively documented. The sole FAA Academy in Oklahoma City is a structural choke point. Its capacity is limited not primarily by physical space, but by the shortage of retired controllers willing to relocate and accept lower pay to serve as instructors. Of applicants who survive initial screening and reach academy training, approximately 72 percent complete it—and of those, only around 60 percent ultimately reach full certification.

The training process takes three to four years from date of hire. On-the-job training instructors (OJTIs) at facilities are too few to train at the pace the staffing crisis demands. The COVID-19 pandemic, during which the FAA halted hiring and closed the academy while offering no serious protection to the controllers already working, made all of this dramatically worse. The FAA had called a safety summit in March 2023 with over 200 experts to look at these problems with "fresh eyes"—as though the industry had not been staring at them for 40 years.

DOGE layoffs

The Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), headed by right-wing billionaire Elon Musk, tore through the FAA's support staff last year, firing approximately 400 workers including aviation safety assistants, maintenance mechanics, en route charting specialists and radar technicians whose jobs directly support the safety functions of air traffic control. Some of those fired were responsible for updating navigational charts that controllers rely on daily. Others supported safety inspector workflows at a ratio of roughly one assistant per 10 inspectors—work that now falls to the inspectors themselves.

These cuts were carried out by DOGE functionaries with no knowledge of aviation operations, through emails that bypassed the FAA management structure entirely. The FAA administrator publicly claimed none of the eliminated positions were "critical safety" jobs—a phrase so routinely deployed after safety incidents that it has become a bitter joke among controllers.

The FAA's claim that it will "deploy modern staffing models and scheduling tools" to "improve efficiency" echoes the ruthless logic of the DOGE cuts. The FAA's mission, stated plainly, is to provide "safe, orderly, and expeditious" movement of aircraft through the National Airspace System—in that order, with safety listed first. "Efficiency" does not appear in that mission statement, because efficiency is a business metric, not a safety standard. The substitution of one for the other is a political choice in the interests of corporate America, who preach "efficiency" to workers while siphoning up trillions of dollars to pay for war and Wall Street speculation.

NATCA union serves the FAA, not controllers

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) was formed from the workforce that replaced the PATCO strikers after Reagan fired them. From its founding, it has pledged never to strike like PATCO before it. Since then, it has functioned entirely as an agent of management. The livelihoods of NATCA bureaucrats, whose own compensation runs to over $300,000 annually in salary and benefits for top officials, depends on maintaining their "collaborative relationship" with the FAA.

NATCA's leadership unilaterally extended the current contract—already years past its original expiration—twice, without a membership vote, locking controllers into degraded working conditions until 2029. This means controllers must go a stunning 13 years under a single contract before their demands can be addressed. Controllers learned about the most recent extension through a "congratulatory" union newsletter. The union's own president was eventually ousted in the October 2024 union election amid the membership's anger over pay, staffing, benefits and the union's lack of internal democracy.

When DOGE began its assault on FAA support staff earlier this year, NATCA's response was to offer politically neutral advice on how to word replies to DOGE's demands for job justification emails. No solidarity action. No demand for reinstatement of fired workers. Public silence.

Now, facing a reduction in staffing targets that threatens every controller's working conditions, NATCA is pointing to a 3.8 percent pay raise secured through congressional legislation as a victory. This is not a victory—it is a fig leaf.

The union cites the fate of PATCO as an excuse for why nothing can be done. The actual lesson of PATCO is the opposite. It was defeated because the AFL-CIO refused to mobilize the broader labor movement in their defense, leaving them isolated. The answer to that isolation is not permanent surrender but the building of broad, organized resistance across the working class.

Controllers' demands are the same as they were in 1981: full staffing to levels adequate for safe operations, scheduling that treats fatigue as a safety hazard rather than an inconvenience, pay that keeps pace with the cost of living and an end to the dismemberment of FAA support infrastructure.

The path forward is the independent organization of controllers themselves—rank-and-file committees, controlled democratically by the workers in the facilities, that can share information across facilities, coordinate demands and build the broader solidarity that PATCO was denied in 1981. Such committees would have natural allies: pilots and flight attendants who need a safe airspace; aircraft maintenance workers facing the same pressures; ground crew and workers across every industry being driven through the same "efficiency" meat grinder by the same class of people; and the hundreds of millions who travel by air.

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