The nationwide air traffic shutdown and the breakdown of American capitalism

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On Friday afternoon, November 13, the Federal Aviation Administration halted every departing flight in the United States. The ground stop was not lifted until 8:15 p.m., more than four hours later. Over 15,000 flights were canceled or delayed that day, hundreds of thousands of travelers were stranded and cancellations continued through the weekend.

The chaos in air travel has continued into Sunday night, with promises that there would be a return to "normal" on Monday. But there is no assurance of this, and the shutdown's impact is ominous, coming only two weeks before the onset of the holiday season, when air traffic volumes spike.

This was the second nationwide ground stop in less than four years. The first, in January 2023, came after a contractor accidentally deleted files in the FAA's NOTAM pilot-alert system, corrupting its backup as well. Neither was caused by an attack, rather, in both cases, the system simply failed.

There are still many questions about Friday's failure. According to Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford, the fault began with a technician for L3Harris Technologies, the military contractor that runs the FAA's telecommunications network, while replacing copper lines with fiber at a remote FAA site and installing a new router. On Sunday, Duffy pointed to a router installed in El Dorado, in southern Arkansas. A second router recently installed in Amarillo, Texas, is also being examined.

The new router reportedly began flooding the network with about 1,000 log-on attempts every four to five seconds. As overloaded facilities switched to their backups, the flood spread. Radar and communications feeds became unstable at 17 facilities, and for 45 minutes the FAA could not determine the cause. It then stopped all air traffic. According to CBS News, the routers being replaced were manufactured between 2001 and 2006. Both routers are now at an L3Harris laboratory in Florida, where FAA staff are taking part in the review.

The outage also came days after the FAA expanded SMART—an artificial intelligence-based traffic management system developed by the startup Air Space Intelligence—to all 22 of its en route centers. SMART had begun operating in the Washington D.C. area only in September, and full deployment had originally been projected to take one to two years. The company denied any connection to the outage, and Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin said the investigation would determine whether the system played any role.

Members of Congress had asked in October how the system was tested, writing that "frontline aviation safety workers were notified of the SMART tool rollout mere days in advance or not at all." The FAA's announcement of the nationwide expansion did not answer them. The FAA insists that SMART cannot replace controllers. But the system already processes data on controller staffing, and it is being introduced as the agency lowers its own staffing targets. Ultimately, it will be used to justify fewer controllers and to intensify the work of those who remain.

Duffy's response has been to blame the contractor. "The network that we use at the FAA to control the airspace—L3Harris actually owns that network," he said on Saturday, adding that many contractors "take our money and provide really poor service." He did not explain how a public system came to be owned by a private military contractor. The FAA handed its telecommunications network to Harris Corporation in 2002. In 2025, L3Harris (a merger of Harris and L3 Technologies, a split-off from Lockheed Martin) spent $1.15 billion buying back its own shares.

SMART was handed out in the same way. In June, the FAA awarded Air Space Intelligence, which is backed by Silicon Valley venture capital, a 12-year, $875 million contract. Before the award, the company's political action committee donated $2,500 to the congressional campaign of Michael Alfonso, Duffy's son-in-law.

Officials have not explained how a single router at a remote site could spread instability across the national network, why the backups meant to isolate such a failure instead carried it, or what testing preceded the installation. The scale of the breakdown is itself an indictment. If a single router was able to bring down the largest aviation system in the world, this fact alone refutes every claim that the system is safe in the hands of those now running it.

The collapse of air traffic control was one of several such calamities in a single week. On Wednesday, a Brooklyn apartment building collapsed into the pit of a luxury development whose builders had ignored a stop-work order, killing eight people, including two children. On Friday, a tanker

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on the Mississippi struck a docked riverboat in New Orleans and rolled it onto its side. On Saturday night, a UPS cargo jet and a Copa Airlines passenger jet collided on a taxiway in Miami. On Sunday, a controller shortage halted flights between Los Angeles and Oakland.

Such a level of breakdown is not a series of accidents. The roots of this crisis go back nearly half a century. From 1938 the Civil Aeronautics Board regulated air transport like a public utility, setting fares, routes and schedules. In October 1978, Democratic President Jimmy Carter signed the Airline Deregulation Act, championed by Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, which set the CAB on the path to abolition. Deregulation of trucking and rail soon followed.

The decisive blow came in 1981. On August 3, some 13,000 controllers organized in the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike for shorter hours, more staff and higher pay. The Reagan administration fired more than 11,000 of them, they were blacklisted for life and the union was decertified. The plan to break the strike had been drawn up in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter's FAA, and the AFL-CIO ordered other airline workers to cross the picket lines.

Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, who had been appointed by Carter, later explained what was at stake: "The most important single action of the administration in helping the anti-inflation fight was defeating the air traffic controllers strike." The destruction of PATCO opened a decades-long offensive against the working class: plant closures, wage cuts, union-busting and the transformation of the unions into instruments of management.

Deregulation and the smashing of PATCO laid the foundations for the reorganization of American capitalism around the unfettered rule of the financial markets. Profit came increasingly not from production but from speculation, mergers, stock buybacks and the stripping of assets. Infrastructure that yielded no immediate return was starved. Public functions were handed to contractors whose sole interest was to make a profit for their shareholders, not serve the American people.

The consequences for the air traffic control workforce are still felt today. Reagan's mass firings produced a generation of replacement controllers who were hired at the same time and are now retiring at the same time, and the FAA had never replaced them in adequate numbers. In 1981, controllers handled about 14,200 commercial flights a day. Today, about 11,000 fully certified controllers staff a system that handles more than 44,000 flights daily. In May, the FAA lowered its own target for certified controllers from 14,633 to 12,563. In February 2025, weeks after a midair collision over the Potomac killed 67 people, the administration fired nearly 400 FAA employees, reportedly including staff who maintained radar, landing and navigation equipment.

Controllers have been treated accordingly. Congress approved a 3.8 percent raise this year, but the FAA paid only 1 percent and withheld the rest. The remaining 2.8 percent was released in October only after the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), which replaced PATCO after its decertification, agreed to badge tracking and demand-based scheduling.

NATCA has accepted this framework at every stage. Its leadership has repeatedly extended the controllers' contract without a vote of the membership, a practice that a resolution submitted to the union's 2025 convention denounced as "contempt for the membership's right to self-determination." On Friday, it was the training and experience of controllers and pilots, not the systems built by contractors, that brought thousands of aircraft safely to the ground. But the union's strategy consists of appeals to Congress and the FAA, the same bodies that have presided over the crisis.

Every area of social life has been subordinated to the enrichment of a financial oligarchy and to the requirements of war. Trillions have been found for corporate tax cuts, bank bailouts and the Pentagon, but not for the infrastructure on which society depends.

The collapse of air traffic control poses the most fundamental political questions. The systems on which millions of lives depend cannot be left in the hands of private contractors and the financial markets. They must be placed under public ownership and run democratically by the workers who build and operate them. Rebuilding air traffic control and the rest of the country's infrastructure, and hiring the tens of thousands of workers needed at decent wages, requires resources on a vast scale. They can be obtained only by expropriating the wealth of the oligarchy and ending the war budget.

Controllers need organizations of their own: rank-and-file committees controlled democratically by the workers in the facilities, to share information, expose dangerous conditions and coordinate demands across facilities. Such committees would have natural allies in pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, ground crew and workers in every industry.

The disaster in the air, the house collapse in Brooklyn and the wreck on the Mississippi are the products of a social order that can no longer maintain the basic conditions of modern life. The opposition expressed in the elections cannot be realized through the Democratic Party, which bears responsibility for every stage of this decline. It requires an independent political movement of the working class, in the United States and internationally, to break the grip of the financial oligarchy and reorganize economic life on a socialist basis.

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