Following nationwide shutdown, ground stops hit Chicago and Atlanta airports during Thanksgiving week

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The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered ground stops at the world's two busiest airports, Chicago O'Hare and Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson, on three successive days during Thanksgiving week. Equipment failures and air traffic controller shortages have disrupted flights during one of the busiest travel periods of the year, less than two weeks after a nationwide breakdown of the US air traffic control system.

The stops came only days after a technical failure on November 13 triggered the third nationwide ground stop in US history.

Chicago and Atlanta ranked first and second globally in aircraft movements in 2025, handling a combined 1.66 million takeoffs and landings. The FAA expects this Thanksgiving travel period to be the busiest in 16 years, with nearly 418,000 flights between November 23 and December 1.

On Sunday morning, an outage in Delta Air Lines' automated weight-and-balance system forced the FAA to briefly halt Atlanta-bound Delta flights. More than 1,600 Delta flights nationwide were delayed as a result, according to the airline. With the software offline, Delta staff calculated weight and balance figures manually. The FAA stressed that the outage was "not related" to air traffic control systems.

On Monday, the FAA halted flights bound for Chicago O'Hare for approximately 90 minutes, citing "staffing constraints at Chicago Terminal Radar Approach Control" (TRACON), the facility responsible for guiding aircraft into and out of the Chicago area. The facility has just 83 fully certified controllers against a staffing target of 100, according to the November figures compiled by the industry website 123ATC.

That evening, staffing shortages also prompted a 44-minute ground stop at Las Vegas's Harry Reid International Airport.

On Tuesday, a failure of O'Hare's ground surveillance radar, which controllers use to monitor aircraft and vehicles on the airport's runways and taxiways, forced another ground stop. Delays continued after the FAA lifted the stop. By late afternoon, FlightAware had recorded 373 flight delays at O'Hare. The FAA also anticipated another staffing shortage at Chicago TRACON Tuesday evening.

The three ground stops followed another airline computer failure on November 16, when a system outage at United Airlines disrupted departing flights for more than 90 minutes.

New FAA safety requirements also took effect Tuesday for "line up and wait" operations, in which aircraft are cleared to enter a runway before receiving permission to take off. A supervisor must now oversee these operations without simultaneously performing other operational duties. Controllers told the *Washington Post* that supervisors frequently take on multiple duties, especially during morning and night shifts.

Roughly 11,000 fully certified controllers manage more than 44,000 flights daily nationally. In May, the FAA lowered its own target for certified controllers from 14,633 to 12,563—a target it still cannot reach. National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) President Nick Daniels told NPR on November 16 that the system is short approximately 3,000 certified controllers. Most controllers, he said, work six-day weeks, with compulsory overtime and shifts of up to 10 hours.

The November 13 nationwide ground stop lasted nearly five hours. More than 18,000 flights were canceled in the ensuing disruption, affecting some 1.5 million passengers. A ground stop of this kind has occurred only twice before: on September 11, 2001, and in January 2023, when the NOTAM pilot-alert system crashed.

The FAA has directed L3Harris to temporarily halt its router upgrades, which are suspected of causing the cascading failure, while an investigation is conducted. L3Harris, the military contractor that owns and operates the FAA's telecommunications network, had been replacing old copper T1 lines with fiber-optic lines and installing new routers.

A single router at an FAA site in El Dorado, Arkansas, is believed to have flooded the network with log-on attempts, triggering a series of cascading failures that destabilized radar and communications feeds at 17 facilities. The router reportedly generated about 1,000 log-on attempts every four to five seconds. As overloaded facilities switched to their backups, the flood spread.

Controllers had to use the radar and radio channels that remained available to safely guide some 3,500 airborne aircraft

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to their destinations. A second router recently installed in Amarillo, Texas, is also being examined. The routers being replaced were manufactured between 2001 and 2006.

Juniper Networks, the maker of the new routers, told the *Wall Street Journal* that its router "did not fail" and appeared to be working as intended. On November 17, the Washington Post reported that an FAA official had overseen, tested and approved the contractor's work in Arkansas before the outage.

The human cost of these failures was borne by working people. One Minnesota man, stranded in Austin when his flights were canceled, drove 21 hours home in a rented U-Haul box truck so he could be there when his wife started a new job and get his children to school. The trip with a colleague covered some 1,200 miles.

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. Congress had asked in October how the system was tested, writing that frontline aviation safety workers were "notified of the SMART tool roll-out mere days in advance or not at all." The FAA and the company deny any connection between SMART and the outage.

On Tuesday, 24 House Democrats sent a letter to the FAA criticizing its nationwide deployment of SMART on November 10, just 50 days into a planned 90-day validation period in the Washington D.C. region. The lawmakers also raised allegations that FAA employees who voiced safety concerns had faced retaliation. They demanded a response by November 30.

Even before the nationwide ground stop, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy had been pressing Congress for another $30 billion in aviation infrastructure funding, on top of the $12.5 billion Congress appropriated in 2025. He raised his demand to $50 billion on the day of the outage.

The money would flow to private contractors such as those who now run the system. The FAA handed its telecommunications network to Harris Corporation in 2002; L3Harris spent $1.2 billion buying back its own shares last year. Air Space Intelligence, the maker of the SMART system, received a 12-year contract worth up to $875 million in June—after its political action committee donated $2,500 to the congressional campaign of Duffy's son-in-law. There is no established evidence that the donation influenced the award.

Several Republican senators said they support Duffy's call for upgrade funding, but nowhere near the $50 billion he is demanding.

"I don't think the full $50 billion will be funded," said Texas Senator Ted Cruz, chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee. "Some of that is not safety-related."

Instead of raising controller pay to make up for decades of declining purchasing power, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have pressed Congress for increased spending on equipment and automation while failing to hire and retain sufficient numbers of controllers—the very workers whose training and experience keep the flying public safe during recurring equipment outages.

Many controllers cannot afford to live in the cities where they are required to work, because of skyrocketing housing costs. The facilities are located where air traffic is heaviest, which also happen to be among the most expensive cities in the country.

In addition to their financial woes, controllers have for years had to contend with mandatory overtime and widespread low morale and burnout due to abysmal staffing.

NATCA union officials have collaborated with the Trump administration in imposing new demands on this exhausted workforce. Congress approved a 3.8 percent raise this year, but the FAA paid only 1 percent and withheld the rest. On October 16, NATCA agreed to badge tracking, demand-based scheduling and changes to the reassignment process in exchange for the remaining 2.8 percent. The FAA's financial report says it expects to pay the increase and back pay by December.

In the NPR interview, Daniels acknowledged the staffing crisis while reaffirming the union apparatus's support for Duffy's modernization funding campaign. "We have stood, you know, with the secretary and advocated for more money," he said. He also called for improvements in controllers' pay and working conditions.

The controllers' conditions are the product of a deliberate policy stretching back to Reagan's destruction of PATCO in 1981, which opened the way for the privatization and starvation of the air traffic system. Reagan fired more than 11,000 striking air traffic controllers after they defied his order to return to work. Successive Democratic and Republican administrations have maintained the ban on strikes by federal workers while increasingly entrusting critical public infrastructure to private corporations.

The actions of the controllers during the November 13 ground stop and the airline workers during the subsequent outages demonstrate whose labor keeps the aviation system functioning. The enormous sums being discussed in Washington must be used to expand staffing, substantially raise wages and modernize equipment under the oversight of the workers who use and maintain it. The system must be taken out of private hands, placed under public ownership and run democratically by the workers who operate it—and the controllers need rank-and-file committees of their own in order to fight for that.

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