

The air traffic controllers strike of 1981

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In this study, I intend to provide an overview of the air traffic controllers' strike that occurred in 1981. This strike came at the peak of increased tension between the air traffic controllers union, PATCO, and the FAA, a federal agency charged with overseeing the management of all civil air flights. The strike occurred on August 3, 1981. On that day, approximately 12,000 air traffic controllers went on strike, effectively crippling the civil air industry.

As members of PATCO, these individuals certainly felt they had the right to strike; however, under the terms of certain laws affecting federal employees, the air traffic controllers, in fact, did not have this right. As a result, President Reagan immediately threatened that any air traffic controller not back at work within 48 hours of the start of the strike would lose his or her job.

Three days later, the FAA issued 12,000 dismissal notices and the strike officially came to an end (Spector, 1982, p.). Of particular interest to me is not only the details and particulars of this strike, but also the structural circumstances that precipitated it and why compensation negotiations were ineffectual. Therefore, I will focus the remainder of this overview on several key points: the internal and external environmental forces that led to the strike, specific human resources issues that made air traffic controllers apt to strike, and a review of the negotiation process and the failed proposals on both sides.

In the course of this evaluation, I will discuss some of the major players in the strike, analyze some of the fundamental causes of this strike, and even present at least one alternative solution that was proposed at the time and

should have probably been implemented without fail. In this, I intend to illustrate the nature of the air traffic controllers' strike of 1981 and the factors that made it all but inevitable. To begin with, let's consider some of the major players who were involved in the air traffic controllers' strike. First, there is the FAA.

This is the federal agency that was established in 1958 to manage all civilian air flights in the United States. At the time of the strike, all air traffic controllers in the United States were trained, certified, and employed by the FAA (Spector, 1982, p. 1). In other words, the FAA had a literal stranglehold on the market for air traffic controllers in the United States. To work in the United States as an air traffic controller, thus, meant that one had to work with the FAA and abide by their prescriptions for how air traffic controllers should be employed.

Second, we should consider PATCO, or the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization. This group was affiliated with the AFL-CIO and was created in 1968. It was, in short, a union of air traffic controllers. During the 1970s, in particular, PATCO grew at a tremendous rate (Spector, 1982, p. 2). By the time the potential strike rolled around, most of the air traffic controllers in the United States were members of PATCO. Third, we should consider the head of PATCO, the man who lead the organization down the more militant path towards strike and whose ultimate negotiations with the FAA would precipitate the strike in the first place.

Robert Poll took the reins at PATCO in 1980, partially in response to attitudes within the organization that felt a more aggressive stance was needed

towards the FAA on the part of unionized air traffic controllers (Spector, 1982, p. 2). In this context, we can see that Poll and PATCO were immediately at odds with the FAA, which as an organization naturally wanted to maintain its monopolistic control over the supply of air traffic controllers.

The conflict between the two primary players in this strike-the FAA and PATCO-was only exasperated by certain pieces of federal legislation that prohibited federal employees from using strikes, sit-ins, or work slow downs to affect changes in their employment status. Legislation such as the Federal Relations Labor act prevented federal unionized employees to use their union status for anything other than collective bargaining (Spector, 1982, p. 2). This structural component of the issue further tied the figurative hands of PATCO and the air traffic controllers.

It may even have precipitated a strike if the air traffic controllers felt cornered and desperate in their dealings with the FAA. If the air traffic controllers did not think there was any possibility of seeing their demands met-and how could they, if they were not permitted to use the threat of a strike? -then it is possible that they would have instigated the strike in desperation. There were a number of other issues that certainly led to a strike-style conflict between the FAA and PATCO.

For example, of the 17, 275 air traffic controllers employed in July 1981, all had to take part in a seventeen-week training course and then participate in on-the-job training for an additional two to four years. The FAA estimated that the total cost of training an air traffic controller amounted to \$175, 000

(Spector, 1982, p. 4). From the perspective of the FAA, labor negotiations were unlikely to result in higher pay rates or other forms of compensation.

From the federal perspective, a significant amount of money had already been invested in these individuals; more was not a viable option. For the air traffic controllers, however, increased pay was the least of their concerns. As air traffic controllers knew all too well, the job of managing dozens of aircraft from the ground simultaneously was not easy. When PATCO went to the negotiation table with the FAA prior to the strike, they listed a number of concerns and problems that they wanted to see corrected. These included, but were not limited to, the following.

One, PATCO was concerned about access. The FAA gave unfettered access to airports at any time, to anyone. The result was extremes of traffic during peak and off hours of the day or week. PATCO also cited poor supervision from individuals who were often paid more than the air traffic controllers to do nothing more than shift paperwork around. Safety responsibility was also a concern—given the demands of the job and the life-or-death nature of it, some air traffic controllers felt that there should be a better system of managing and accepting responsibility.

Finally, the air traffic controllers were concerned about their pay scale, especially lost overtime hours according to federal mandate (Spector, 1982, p. 10-11). Salaries for air traffic controllers were reasonable for the period, however some federal regulations placed a cap on the amount that any individual could earn as a federal employee. Additionally, limitations were

made regarding the amount of pay that could be awarded during any two week period, regardless of hours worked.

This fact, combined with the extremely stressful nature of the job, upset many at PATCO (Spector, 1982, p. 4, 6). The fact that the FAA rated as one of the poorest employers of air traffic controllers worldwide in terms of hours worked per week, vacation days, and sick leave only made matters worse (Spector, 1982, p. 5). Thus, when the FAA and PATCO went to the negotiation table in the days and weeks preceding the strike on August 3, there were a number of issues that had to be resolved between them.

The air traffic controllers felt overworked, overstressed, and under appreciated in general. The FAA felt that it had the upper hand because the air traffic controllers were unable, by federal law, to go on strike. For this reason, the eventual strike-in hindsight-seems all but inevitable. In fact, the assumption that the FAA had the upper hand in the negotiations may have led directly to their counter offer which was much more conservative than the original PATCO demands.

PATCO wanted an increase in salaries, a new maximum salary limit, a reduction in the work week, earlier retirement benefits, and cost of living adjustments to be made twice a year. The FAA negotiator, John Helms, estimated that this package would cost the government around \$744 million the first year. He countered with a proposal that would only cost \$40 million the first year, but which was a significantly watered down version of PATCO demands (Spector, 1982, p. 10). The union rejected this offer and went back to the negotiation table.

When the second counter offer from the FAA was also not to their liking, they voted 95% in favor of going on strike (Spector, 1982, p. 11). The consequent strike on August 3, 1981 cost most of PATCO members their jobs and ended up costing the aviation industry, as well as associated industries such as tourism and hotels, millions of dollars in lost profits. Given these myriad environmental forces, symptoms and causes, and the inherent conflict between the FAA and PATCO, it is little wonder that a strike was the ultimate result between the negotiations between the FAA and PATCO.

But what might have been done differently, what other solution might have worked in the past to alleviate the problems that occurred? For an answer I turn to Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO who said at the time, " The air traffic control system is a purely subsidized service the government is providing for the private airline industry. Under the Reagan doctrine of getting the government off people's backs, you'd think they might try to turn the whole thing over to the industry to run instead of using the might and majesty of the government to suppress a strike" (Spector, 1982, p. 4).

In fact, this is exactly the solution that I would have suggested at the time and would advocate today as a solution to the mess that the FAA found itself in in 1981. If the FAA had been privatized, the concerns and issues that air traffic controllers were having could have been easily resolved between PATCO and the airline industry, in whose best interest it would have been to resolve the matter to keep planes in the air and profits in the black.

Instead, the government used an ineffective law to force almost 12, 000 people out of work who were simply trying to use the power of the strike to

leverage themselves better working conditions. Especially when we consider the magnitude of the job that air traffic controllers did (and do) and the safety of countless lives that could have been at stake, it is even amazing that the government responded to the legitimate concerns of air traffic controllers in the way that it did.