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The Pressures of PATCO: Strikes and Stress in the 1980s

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On August 3, 1981 almost 13,000 air traffic controllers went on strike after months of negotiations with the federal government. During the contract talks, Robert Poli, president of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCO), explained the union's three major demands as a $10,000 across the board raise, a 32-hour workweek (down from 40), and a better retirement package. While the press and hearings in Congress focused almost exclusively on the demand for a pay raise, certain commentators recognized that the air controllers' walkout was not solely, or even primarily, an economic issue. *Newsweek* noted that "controllers concede that their chief complaint is not money but hours, working conditions, and a lack of recognition for the pressures they face." *Time* wrote that the 32-hour week was "a reduction that the controllers seem to want more than the pay increases. . . . most PATCO members see this issue as the key to lowering their on-the- job anxieties and enhancing safety." One striker later explained that the $10,000 demand "was always negotiable; anyone who believed it would come to pass was dreaming. Of primary importance to most was a reduced work week and an achievable retirement." 1 Such views had little effect on negotiations; 48 hours after the walkout, President Reagan fired the 11,350 ATCs (almost 70% of the workforce) who had not returned to work. In case the message was still unclear, he declared a lifetime ban on the rehiring of the strikers by the FAA.

The dramatic circumstances surrounding the strike attracted much commentary, at the time and subsequently. This attention, however, for the most part, failed to uncover or illuminate the fundamental issue under contention: control of the workplace. A study of the relationship over several years between air traffic controllers and their employer, the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA), and the language, reasoning, and actions used by controllers both before and after the strike, as well as the FAA's responses, 2 reveals the centrality of this fight which has traditionally characterized strong labor action in the past. Despite the assertions of many that the issue of control has little relevance in the "modern" high-tech workplace and has been superseded by other concerns, it was the galvanizing force behind many controller protests over the years and led to the explosion in 1981 with the strike. Indeed, instead of a redefinition of workplace relations in the twentieth century, the same struggle over control continues, only in less evident, and perhaps more dangerous, ways.

Historians have long debated whether workplace control is still a key issue in late twentieth century management-worker relations. Many scholars and much of society have surmised that the development of new technology and modes of production would alter the terms of, or even eliminate, this conflict. The rapidly changing character of world markets and new economic and technological advances would preclude the usefulness of the traditional adversarial relationship fostered by unions and managers at the point of production and replace it with a participative model which reduced the need for work rules, grievance systems, and wage standards. With the restructuring of the workplace as a "caring community," traditional dissatisfaction would "dissolve in an atmosphere of unity and good feeling" and do away with conflict and division. New technology would allow workers to

perform more creative, useful, and interesting tasks; reduce hazards at the workplace; and even lead to less hours and more leisure time. 3

Harry Braverman, in his classic book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974), disputed this optimistic view of change in the twentieth century workplace. He instead presented work (in capitalism) as inherently geared to the creation of profit rather than the satisfaction of man's needs, thus ensuring a fundamental conflict of interest between workers and capitalists. As management systematically attempted to reach the potential of its labor in the face of antagonistic relations, it looked to scientific management theory, as well as technology, in order to better control labor. The widespread adoption of Taylorism had only initiated the process of deskilling jobs and removing autonomy, responsibility, and judgement from the shop floor, which then continued through other, more sophisticated, and less obvious, methods. 4

Historians David Noble, Harley Shaiken, Barbara Garson, and Ronald Howard have all supported variations of Braverman's thesis, primarily by studying the effects and implications of technology and automation on blue and white collar workers. Like Braverman they argue that the primary impetus behind job definitions and the structure of developing technology has generally been to limit worker autonomy further. Cost reduction and profit, frequently management's explanation for implementing changes in job structures, have thus been only rationalizations masking initiatives basically designed to strengthen managerial control. 5

A study of the reasons for the ongoing strife between the FAA and air traffic controllers, highlighted by the strike, demonstrates how important the issue of workplace control continues to be in late twentieth century worker-management relations. Moreover, it indicates how factors such as technological advances and the discourse and substance of labor-management bargaining since World War II have served to mask this struggle, often to the disadvantage of the workers involved.

The PATCO controversy is particularly useful to illustrating such an assessment for several reasons. First, while air traffic controllers are employees of the FAA, ostensibly the overriding goal of both groups is to assure the maximum safety of air travel. This presumably removes the traditional conflict of interests between management's search for profits and workers' job satisfaction, and would seemingly make for harmonious relations. Since this was not the case, obviously other factors worked to divide the two groups.

Second, the FAA possessed a monopoly over the training and hiring of air traffic controllers (except for a small percentage who worked for the military). With specialized skills and usually limited education, most ATCs had little choice but to work for the government. They therefore had a large stake in work conditions and benefits. The same factors gave the FAA a strong hand in dealing with its workforce.

Third, the majority of controllers found their work intrinsically interesting. Most described their occupation as challenging and exciting. As one explained, "the expression is used about printers that they get ink in their blood. We have airplanes in our blood." A striker noted in 1984 that "I have been unable to find a job or position that offers the same excitement and personal satisfaction that controlling aircraft did." 6 Such job satisfaction indicates that the complaints of air controllers ran deeper than unhappiness with the occupation per se.

Finally, advancing technology played a key role in both the cause and the resolution of the strike. Controllers, for the most part, paid little attention to the implications of automation on their occupation, although PATCO occasionally faulted the FAA's emphasis on equipment instead of people. Most controllers believed in the centrality and necessity of human skill and judgement to the

system. Indeed, they welcomed almost any equipment or programs that might assist them in their work. At the same time, though, an overwhelming number of individual ATC complaints singled out stress as a primary motive for striking. Greater air traffic volume and increased demands on ATC capabilities made possible by new technology, coupled with faulty equipment and autocratic management that limited workplace autonomy, were the obvious causes of such stress. Yet neither PATCO nor the controllers made this connection explicit or strongly challenged management privilege to decide the nature and purpose of computers in air towers.

Meanwhile, FAA officials clearly saw automation as a means of eliminating dependence on skilled controllers. As an editorial in *Aviation Week and Space Technology* commented, "few federal bureaucrats have the chance to fire 70% of their departments and replace the victims with lower-salaried recruits--or with computers and black boxes." In 1982 J. Lynn Helms (head of the FAA) announced a twenty year program costing between $15 and $20 billion to replace the system's aging computers and further move towards automating air control.[7]

While the strike suddenly made relations between PATCO and the FAA headline news, there was nothing novel about their opposing stances and uncompromising positions. PATCO and the FAA had had a turbulent relationship since the formation of the union in 1968. In 1968, 1969, 1970, 1974, 1975, and 1978 ATCs conducted nationwide slowdowns and sickouts in efforts to gain better pay, training, staffing, retirement benefits, less hours, and in response to FAA actions such as the involuntary transfer of certain union activists. By 1980 the union had achieved significant benefits for controllers, including one of the best retirement systems in the country and the best collective bargaining position of any union in the public sector. At the same time, an "us vs. them" mentality prevailed between PATCO and the FAA. This divide was reinforced by PATCO's establishment of a group of "responsible militants" (referred to as a strike force at times) in 1978 to help organize and lead membership, and the FAA's creation of a management strike contingency force in 1980 as both groups anticipated renegotiating the controllers' contract when it expired in February 1981.

Two studies conducted during the 1970s confirmed the existence of deep-rooted problems. A task force commissioned by the Secretary of Transportation in April 1968 to explore ATC complaints released its official findings in January 1970. The Corson Committee Report warned that employee-management relations with the FAA were in "extensive disarray." Concerned about an extremely low controller morale and its possible effects on public safety, the committee urged a sharp reduction in work hours, the upgrading of equipment and facilities, the reduction of required overtime, the expansion of intervals between shift rotations, and the revision of pay criteria. Most significant, it recommended making these changes by working with appropriate employee organizations. The report also criticized PATCO for "ill-considered and intemperate attacks on FAA management." But it placed the majority of blame on the failure of FAA management to "understand and accept the role of employee organizations" and its tolerance of "ineffective internal communications."[8]

The FAA commissioned a more extensive study in 1972. Headed by Dr. Robert Rose, the five year, $2.8 million project led to similar conclusions. The 750-page Rose Report found that the job of an air traffic controller was not uniquely or debilitatingly stressful. However, the researchers added that many of the stresses that were associated with the job, indicated by high levels of drinking and depression, were due to autocratic management and a system which included little reward and a fear of burnout. The Rose Report labeled morale as "low" among nearly 40% of controllers.

The FAA paid little attention to such warnings and implemented few of the reports' recommendations. FAA officials seemed to view the reports alone as somehow conducive to ameliorating workplace relations and continued to act in ways that both the Corson and Rose Reports had condemned. For

instance, in 1979 FAA Administrator Langhorne Bond arbitrarily terminated an Immunity Provision which had been included in the 1978 three-year FAA/PATCO contract. This program was designed by controllers to encourage ATCs, pilots, and administrators to exchange information and thereby learn from each others' mistakes without fear of retribution or ridicule. It set up an outside, disinterested committee under the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) to process accounts of mistakes and act as a buffer between the FAA and system users. Controllers and pilots could report errors and in most situations remain immune from disciplinary action. Regularly published reports compiled from this data then circulated throughout the aviation industry, making system users aware of common pitfalls.9 Bond's refusal to honor the contract provision not only further eroded FAA- ATC relations, it led to a drop in reported incidents, thereby undermining aviation safety.

At the same time, the FAA was demanding that controllers handle increasing traffic loads with staffing that was already below the agency's own standards. When the union pointed out the problem, the FAA revised its facility staffing standards to legitimize the situation.10

A fundamental struggle over workplace control best explains such seemingly irrational actions (the FAA's raison d'etre being to enforce and maintain the safety of air travel). As several historians have documented, in labor-management relations conflicts over control are extremely volatile and management reactions are not necessarily "rational" in strict economic terms. Indeed, management understands labor's threat in this arena as a challenge to the system underlying its own power and status. 11 Barbara Garson has specifically argued that the contemporary combination of nineteenth-century scientific management and twentieth-century technology is basically an effort to centralize control and move decisionmaking up the bureaucratic hierarchy. The "specific form that automation is taking seems to be based less on a rational desire for profit than on an irrational prejudice against people."12

Interestingly, during the years before the strike, FAA acquisition of better, more advanced equipment was surprisingly slow. Only when the possibility of a strike loomed did the FAA make a concerted effort to implement better technology into the air towers. While bureaucratic inefficiency and financial limitations explain part of this delay, it appears that an important reason was that new technology would have done little to increase managerial leverage over controllers. Indeed, such upgrades might have lessened FAA control. Only when the strike made it absolutely necessary did the FAA invest substantially in new technology after spending considerable effort on ensuring such equipment would mean less reliance on controllers' work.

A closer look at the FAA's plans concerning the use of computers in air traffic control supports such an analysis. An April 1982 issue of *Technology Review* described an important aspect of the FAA's new program:

> Between 1989 and 1995, an automated en-route air traffic control (AERA) facility will be implemented to carry out normal routing and conflict-avoidance without controllers' intervention. . . . Such a system implies that the entire task of routing air traffic will be done with minimal human intervention, changing the controller's role from that of an active participant to that of a monitor. Only if the computer system shuts down or judgments beyond the programmed instructions were required would direct human intervention be expected.13

This effort to minimize the role of controllers, though, actually conflicted with the development of optimal technical alternatives which would improve the safety of air travel, as a 1982 Rand Corporation report pointed out. Rand blasted the direction of FAA research and development, writing that:

> The AERA scenario presents serious problems for each of the three major goals of ATC--safety, efficiency, and increased productivity. By depending on an autonomous, complex, fail-safe system to compensate for keeping the human controller out of the route decision-making loop, the AERA scenario jeopardizes the goal of safety. Ironically, the better AERA works, the more complacent its human managers may become, the less often they may question its actions, and the more likely their system is to fail without their knowledge. We have argued that not only is AERA's complex, costly, fail-safe system questionable from a technical perspective, it is also unnecessary in other, more moderate ATC system designs.14

Rand proposed an alternative called Shared Control in which the role of the controller would be expanded so that "he is routinely involved in the minute-to-minute operation of the system" using an increasing suite of automated tools. Obviously, Shared Control had little appeal for an FAA more interested in limiting worker autonomy than promoting public safety.15

The FAA's reluctance to implement managerial practices that might be less abrasive and improve FAA-ATC personal relations during these years is more difficult to explain. In part, this reluctance might have stemmed from a basic fear that personnel management techniques might irrevocably undermine the hierarchical structure on which management control and power rested. Yet many other businesses have successfully used such approaches to consolidate control over labor. It appears that in this case the FAA's employment monopoly is a main reason for rejecting such a system. ATCs have no alternative to working for the FAA, thus a seemingly more responsive management is unnecessary to maintain its labor force.

Another oft-cited component which may have contributed to the continuation of autocratic management is a military orientation within the FAA's air traffic control system. One management specialist recommended that 40-50% of supervisors be replaced because of the high proportion of people with a paramilitary management value system. He explained that such an approach indicated a deeply engrained autocratic belief system and obstructed compromise or worker input. (Many supervisors had in fact been in the military. Interestingly, though, the specialist, David Bowers, found it ironic that the "paramilitary style that seemed to be prevalent in the FAA is not one that I have encountered with any frequency in the Navy nor in the work that I have done with the Army.") 16

Other reasons for the FAA's resistance to reform may be a lack of any kind of training program to teach management skills and responsibilities, the practice of simply promoting controllers to positions as supervisors ("they are accustomed to vectoring aircraft. . . . [then] they attempt to manage by vectoring people. But people don't vector. Nevertheless, they have a management philosophy that emphasizes top-down direction, top-down control, autocratic behavior, and says that this is indeed what gets results." 17), and an inefficient, top-heavy bureaucratic structure which inhibits communication.

Finally, the FAA's dual mandate has contributed to its choice of management styles. Created to enforce and monitor air safety, the FAA is also charged with promoting air travel. The resulting interaction of the airline industry, the administration of aviation traffic, and air traffic controllers has often led to outcomes that undermined air safety and exacerbated ATC stress and aggravation. For instance, the FAA has consistently reacted swiftly to stifle PATCO demands, such as regulating flight schedules to even out the volume of air traffic throughout the day, that would slow traffic. This twin purpose also led the FAA to blame any problems in air traffic on the individual controllers rather than the system or employment practices.

By 1981 management-labor relations had deteriorated to an all-time low. ATCs complained of staff shortages, dangerously out- of-date equipment, limited opportunities for transfer, and harsh authoritarian leadership. Using new equipment, supervisors selectively and discreetly, monitored all communications and had the authority to discipline controllers for anything from nonstandard phraseology to rule breaking. Union activists were generally monitored more closely, enabling FAA officials to selectively log mistakes and build cases for future leverage.18

The result was increasingly militant views in the numerous surveys PATCO leadership authorized in preparation for the 1981 contract negotiations. In March 1981, 78% of PATCO membership indicated their willingness to back a strike.19

When negotiations opened with the FAA in February 1981, President Robert Poli brought a list of 97 demands to the table. Of this list, seven grievances dealt with economic issues, two with working hours, five with equipment, and sixty with various working conditions, including items such as facility lighting, dress codes, and staffing levels. As the talks stalled, Poli stressed the demands for an increase in pay, better retirement benefits, and a shorter workweek. In June the FAA made a final offer of a $2,500 pay raise (in addition to the $1,400 ATCs were slated to receive as part of an overall federal pay hike), a 15% increase in pay for night work, and a guaranteed thirty-minute lunch period. When Poli presented the package to the members of PATCO, 95% voted to reject the terms.

The FAA refused to make any further concessions in the talks that followed, and on August 3, 85% of PATCO's members went on strike. When President Reagan threatened to fire all ATCs who did not return to work within 48 hours, only 1,650 did. The remaining 11,350 lost their jobs.

The FAA immediately implemented its newly revised plan designed to offset the effects of a strike. Through the use of flow control (regulating and distributing evenly the number and schedule of daily flights), a minimal force of 10,000 remaining controllers, supervisors, and military personnel (a total of 7,000 fewer than before the strike) were able to maintain over 80% of scheduled air traffic. Although working 6-day, 48-hour plus weeks, workforce morale was high as the remaining controllers and management worked closely together to keep the system aloft. The "honeymoon" period soon ended, though, as temporary expedients attained a normal status. The FAA removed restrictions on air traffic, yet hired few replacements. Worse, the firing of the strikers eliminated a large percentage of the most experienced journeymen, placing a heavy burden on those who remained. The 48-hour week continued in many areas for years, as did mandatory overtime. Not surprisingly, by 1983 controllers were discussing plans to create a new union. In 1987, ATCs (almost all nonstrikers or new employees) moved to form the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA). Their grievances mirrored those of the strikers and exposed again the FAA's ability to rely on technology and monopoly to avoid conceding control over the workplace.

Congressional hearings, surveys, and interviews of controllers conducted before and after 1981 show that the workers' concerns which led to the strike (and many earlier and later protests) stemmed from a vital interest in bettering their lives at work and away from work by reducing the stress involved in their occupation. The air controllers' overwhelming rejection of the FAA's offer of a substantial pay raise in 1981 was indicative of the true interests of the rank and file. Instead of "following the ritual in such cases of dropping its more innovative demands [a shorter workweek and earlier retirement] in return for a higher money wage, the membership greeted the compromises that its leadership was prepared to make with swift disapproval."20 An overriding interest in gaining more power within the workplace in order to minimize stress helps explain this decision. Indeed, as Philip Foner, David Roediger, and David Montgomery, and Benjamin Hunnicutt have shown, the call for shorter hours has historically been one of control and related to broader notions of work and leisure. Controllers frequently linked these issues as well, albeit implicitly.

Most observers, though, attributed the rejection of the contract to controllers' greed and belief in their ability to hold the government hostage to their demands. One reason for this viewpoint was the Reagan administration's and the FAA's tremendous success in influencing media coverage. Such media reports reinforced most Americans' tendencies to view salary and work-related stress as the controllers' primary grievances. The widespread acceptance of such complaints as commonly experienced and unavoidable drawbacks to work led the majority to believe that they did not justify the uproar and inconvenience that the controllers were causing.

A critical component contributing to and ensuring the acceptance of this view was PATCO's own demands and rhetoric. Poli's emphasis on economic benefits served to subsume the basic struggle over power in the workplace; mask the links among stress, autocratic management, and workplace control; and undermine the moral position of the strikers in the eyes of the country. By basing a strike on an action critique of specific FAA techniques rather than an ideological and theoretical critique of managerial control and its relationship to stress, PATCO earned few supporters and the basic issue of manager-labor power remained unaddressed.21

A look at the most publicized aspects of the strike-- economics, stress, and management-- shows how these issues obscured and distorted the controllers' main concern of workplace control and helps explain why problems persist in the ATC workforce. It also demonstrates how management and labor's focus on economic issues since World War II has bankrupted labor's discourse and limited its ability to address concerns outside of a narrow range of concerns.

Numerous commentators criticized PATCO's demand for a $10,000 raise, as did many strikers afterward who said that salary was really not a concern at the time and not the reason for the walkout. The FAA and the Reagan administration seized immediately upon the $10,000 figure and successfully used this issue to prevent support for the strikers. The media focused almost exclusively on the pay raise and the violation of the no-strike pledge, to the exclusion of the controllers' other concerns. The result of such coverage is clear from one striker's wry observation: "I'm still amazed when I talk to union people in my present line of work (phone service sales) of how much they really misunderstood about our job action. They only remember the $10,000 raise and the 4- day workweek." To both unsympathetic members of Congress and the public, PATCO members were "overpaid, secure public sector employees trying to use their monopoly position to secure more than Congressmen were making."22 These perceptions were in part responsible for the overwhelming public approval of Reagan's handling of the strike; 65% in a public opinion poll; mail, according to one representative, ran 1000 to 1 in favor of the administration.

Most strikers denied that money was a critical component in their decision to strike. Yet Poli insisted that his demands, headed by a pay raise, reflected the desires of his constituency. Arthur Shostak, who conducted five surveys of PATCO members in 1979 and 1980 backs up Poli's assertion that salary was important to the strikers. It is tempting to concede then that workers did see the strike as an economic solution to their inability to change working conditions, and merely backed down when faced with public hostility.

However, controllers' statements to the press and in congressional hearings contradict this view and indicate how central the issue of managerial power was to the decision to strike. For instance:

> Controllers suddenly find their work schedule is changed on very short notice instead of with the more common and regular 2-week notice . . . at some locations . . . the sixth workday does not show up on the work schedules, but you are expected to show up. If

> you don't, you get a telephone call. We have had some controllers tell us they have scheduled minor surgery just so they can get 2 days off in succession.
>
> The fear of retaliation or retribution [by the FAA for testifying] is very real in the minds of these controllers. It doesn't take much to have some administrative action taken against you when traffic is being handled at such high volumes.
>
> We are not dealing with robots here, we are dealing with human beings. That is what we are screaming out for. 23

Such comments make it clear that salary was not the critical issue for ATCs. Why the attention to financial benefits then? The basis of the focus and expression of PATCO's demands rested upon prevailing norms of workers' interests and power. Since World War II, labor leaders have placed a disproportionate amount of emphasis on economic gains, and the collective bargaining process has gravitated toward these areas. At the same time, management has carefully guarded its prerogatives from the bargaining process.24 In this context, it seems likely that in envisioning a future strike, controllers felt that wages could and should be one aspect of it. Yet wages were not the decisive factor for most, and their other demands, derived from a far more vital, ideological interest than economic gains, evoked their passionate and surprisingly unified response.

Individual controllers pointed to stress far more often than salary when justifying the strike. Indeed, in the same way that Reagan emphasized PATCO's economic demands to gain support for his actions, PATCO, both leaders and members, pointed to the unique stress that air traffic controllers experienced daily in order to legitimate its demands. Their reasoning rested on two premises: that the nature of air traffic controlling as an occupation made it inherently and uniquely stressful, and that FAA management through indifference to acute staff shortages, dangerously out-of- date equipment, poor training methods, and harsh authoritarian leadership exacerbated that stress. The results of this stress were physical and psychological problems and the undermining of public safety.

Since its founding in 1968 PATCO promoted this stress- relief thesis at every opportunity. Indeed, PATCO's entire case for deserving benefits given no other federal employees hinged on the general acceptance of this two-pronged reasoning. Yet ATCs consistently emphasized the first premise, underscoring the stress inherent in directing air traffic, and neglected the second which related management to the stress. For example, in 1981 strikers constantly spoke of the adverse tolls of their profession. Bob Consart, after 29 years as an ATC, cited his occupation as a primary reason for his divorce and a year of psychotherapy. He explained that "this is a young man's game--like professional ball-playing." An August 1981 article in the *New York Times* reported that "controllers say the heavy responsibilities of their jobs create stress, and they usually retire in their 40's, often with medical problems they say are related to the stress." Another controller told the *Los Angeles Times* that the strain of his job was so great that it was a factor in the breakup of his marriage and had raised both his pulse rate and his blood pressure.25

Poli elaborated upon this theme in testimony before a congressional subcommittee in 1981:

> Controllers constantly face countless situations which require them to make decisions affecting the lives of thousands of people . . . Day in and day out, they must guard against even the smallest error, for a mistake could kill hundreds. There is no room for guesswork, nor is there time to sit back and leisurely consider a traffic situation. Decisions must be swift, positive and correct. . . . Being able to accept such an intense level of responsibility is at the heart of the controller's job. However, its residual effects are felt in every aspect of his life. Over time, while dreading the terrible consequences of

> one incorrect control decision, the controller loses the fight to the knowledge that he is human and in the long run, fallible. The strain created by this internal war generates insidious effects on the controller's entire life. They can manifest themselves in physical or mental disorders, social withdrawal, marital trouble, or concealed alcoholism.26

Arthur Shostak and David Skocik claim that the union argued that stress was caused by the autocratic FAA system, rather than the job itself. But as the passage and statements above indicate, this distinction was often unclear or omitted, opening the way to critics who urged rejection of the stress-relief argument for several reasons: 1) the most comprehensive study of controllers, the Rose Report, found medical proof of the job's hazards "conspicuously elusive;" 2) widespread abuse of medically-related retirements discredited PATCO's claim that 89% of controllers never survived until normal retirement; 3) the love that controllers professed for their jobs and the long waiting list of applicants to the FAA's academy for controllers undermined claims of its killer characteristics; 4) stress as the ATCs explained it was hardly unique to the controller's job, as satirist Mike Royko put it, "almost as many people head for bars at 5 p.m. each workday as get on commuter trains or expressways . . . A lot of people would like to give the striking controllers a pat on the back, but their own hands are shaking too much."27

Citing such points, the FAA maintained that workplace reactions to stress were simply an individual matter and thus did not require organizational changes or reforms. 28 Adherence to a strict medical definition of stress forwarded this thesis and undercut PATCO complaints that referred to quality of life issues outside the workplace such as family.

In 1981 controllers were primarily protesting the conditions under which they worked and their inability to change those conditions rather than the work itself. It was the environment over which they had no control--faulty equipment, long hours, mandatory and unscheduled overtime, fear of arbitrary reprisal, fear of losing the ability to handle the job adequately, and being left without a means of supporting self and family--which led to intolerable stress, burnout, and health problems. But, when thrown together, labelled stress, and unlinked theoretically to autocratic management, observers failed to see these concerns as unique or worthy of work stoppage.

Americans' widespread suffering from and acceptance of stress as inherent in work rather than caused by factors such as certain managerial techniques also bolstered the FAA's position. Indeed, studies have shown that workers tend to blame themselves rather than management or technological design when feeling burned out and incompetent. Stress is seen as "their own inability to function according to the norms established by the company. They feel they are individually failing to live up." 29 Such an approach effectively delegitimized ATC grievances in this area.

Most analysts of the strike have concluded that the controllers were really protesting against the FAA's autocratic management. Commentators criticized PATCO leadership for submerging this complaint in favor of economic gains. In 1983, for instance, an article in the *Washington Monthly* noted that "although complaints about low pay and long hours are conspicuously rare when controllers are asked to name their biggest frustration with the system, complaints about bad managers are almost universal."30

The many congressional hearings also settled upon FAA management as the main problem in the air traffic control system. The Rose Report, two other FAA-commissioned studies (the Jones Reports), and two General Accounting Office surveys pointed to the rigidity and inflexibility of the FAA as the reason for the tremendously low morale in the workforce. However, even as these groups correctly identified the problem as a labor-management conflict, their recommendations failed to improve the situation. By focusing on management practices, researchers and congressmen tended to view low

morale and the strike as a response to "an organization that they [the controllers] experienced as uncaring, unconcerned for its people, uncommunicative, and unreceptive." David Bowers, one compiler of the 1982 Jones Report, attributed the real problem to "an inability to bargain or contractually mandate human concern, considerate behaviors, and mutual affection." 31

These types of evaluations lended themselves to personnel management sorts of solutions such as providing human resource counselors, scheduling "rap sessions," and establishing management training programs. Although the Jones Report also suggested that the FAA should "publish a manual of employee rights and responsibilities that clarifies the basic rules within which everyone works together" and maintain flow control, 32 such concrete improvements were rarely stressed and never implemented. Thus, the emphasis during the congressional hearings placed on the need to improve the nature of FAA management often served to prevent further probing into alternative causes or solutions which might involve acknowledging the need for a restructuring of workplace relations, which in turn might challenge aspects of capitalism and free enterprise central to a general American philosophy and way of life. It was much easier, and in the interest of many, to ignore the politically charged issue of workplace control and concentrate discussion instead on problems with solutions less difficult to reconcile with the prevalent framework of employer- employee relations.

The lackluster results of this focus were predictable and indicative again of the underlying struggle for workplace control between workers and management. For example, the FAA's creation of Human Resource Committees (HRC) and Facility Advisory Boards (FAB) in local control centers in order to improve communication between workers and management and address employee grievances had little, if any, positive effects. A report based on interviews at one center related that:

> The FAA's Human Relations Program at the Indianapolis Center is the joke of the facility. Employees laugh openly at FAA's efforts to make the program workable on paper while they continue with their prestrike policies of employees' relations. . . . the end results show minimal if any improvement. The more senior people do not openly complain about the lack of improvement because for them it is business as usual. The newer people don't openly complain because they know FAA doesn't like the boatrocker and because the older personnel are keeping quiet. 33

More revealing was the FAA's reaction when one Chicago controller organized a national conference of FAB representatives in order to network and thereby improve the communications within respective facilities and with management, and improve the air traffic control system as a whole. The FAA instructed the controller to cancel the convention (he did) or risk punitive action. This was despite the fact that the conference was to be held on the controllers' own time and at their own expense. Again, the discussion in the congressional hearings about this event revolved around the complicated bureaucratic structure of the FAA and its lack of support for the controllers' initiative, missing the whole point of why the FAA felt the need to cancel the conference. Despite the supposed mutual aim of public safety, the FAA was not about to give up its power to dictate working conditions. Indeed, its denial of the existence of any problems and its refusal to negotiate on issues of working conditions underscore this point.

The FAA used personnel management devices as cooptive and repressive measures rather than a means of sharing power. The controllers' turn to another union in 1987 reflects the failure of this supposedly cooperative approach to mitigate the management-labor conflict in the ATC system.

The FAA, Congress, researchers, the media, and workers overshadowed and masked this traditional struggle between management and labor by concentrating on these various issues, effectively

depoliticizing and quantifying the employer-employee conflict. Each problem appeared to have a scientific or readily available solution which would resolve the disagreement and lead to harmonious workplace relations. Common discourse contributed to labor's ineffectiveness in forcing fundamental root problems in the workplace to be directly addressed. Language and discourse, which in the early twentieth century served to unify workers and forward their causes, has become less powerful and incendiary since World War II. In the case of air traffic controllers, scientific studies and surveys transformed worker consciousness into "morale." Worker discontent and dissatisfaction became stress, a medical problem generally accepted as a factor of everyday life. Statements made by individual controllers, however, contest these interpretations of the strike's causes and indicate the potential, though unrealized, of a theoretical, political, and ideological critique of managerial control that is rarely expressed in the late twentieth century.

What is most striking about the grievances made by air traffic controllers before, during, and after the walkout, is the dramatic language they used to express their concerns. In 1981 congressional hearings, Poli responded to an attack on the legitimacy of PATCO's demands by saying that controllers "are not starving, but they are starving for a working condition that does not leave them destroyed individuals when they leave the job after 14, 15, 16 years." Dennis Lebeau, striking after twelve years as an ATC, simply said, "it's our lives at stake and they're worth the sacrifice." The wife of a 28-year old traffic controller in Chicago explained that the strike was not simply a matter of principle but a "matter of survival." In 1984 a striker wrote that "given the same set of circumstances at any given time, I would do it again. There is no doubt history will prove PATCO was right in their actions. Maybe legally wrong, but surely morally right." 34 A placard carried during the strike read: "We're on strike against (F)ear, (A)ntagonism, and (A)dversary."

Consistent use of such passionate, suggestive terms indicates a deeply rooted frustration with FAA management. These men (almost all the controllers were men) were not suffering from economic deprivation or a lack of respect. They loved their jobs. One controller's wife explained that " . . . they were like gods . . . they were like giants; they were like nobody else; . . . macho, crazy, eager, proud, dedicated."35 These very conditions may have contributed to many controllers' decision to strike, as did an almost universal confidence that they were vital to the functioning of the system. These factors may also have embedded the firm conviction that they were entitled to the power to enact changes in the workplace which they believed would better their own lives and enhance the safety of the system. The irony, of course, is that theoretically the FAA had the same goals (operating under the assumption with which most agreed that a happier workforce would enhance safety, while dispirited and overworked ATCs would harm the system's effectiveness). Yet in the eyes of controllers, the FAA's dictatorial character undercut both goals to an intolerable degree. Thus the feeling of morality, survival, and the need to act.36

This power struggle emerged clearly in the many congressional hearings dealing with the status of the ATC system and the government sponsored surveys of the ATC force. Controllers in both instances told again and again of the arbitrary and authoritarian nature of management that little by little eroded their ability to perform their job, their control over life away from work, and their dignity, and the stress that resulted. The FAA's constant attempt to limit worker independence is evident, as is the controllers' interest in gaining more autonomy.

In 1979 a subcommittee of the Committee of Public Works and Transportation held hearings about the adequacy of equipment and staffing in the ATC system. Interestingly and significantly, when the committee's staff attempted to collect information from twenty ATC centers around the country to compare statistics on FAA equipment and procedures in preparation for the hearings, the FAA issued orders advising centers not to provide any information. In his opening statement Representative Tom Corson (IL) noted controllers' complaints that there were "no set standards used by supervisors in

deciding numbers and qualifications of people necessary to work at a given time." 37 Corson emphasized that shortages of qualified staff, inadequately maintained and out of date equipment, insufficient training programs, safety hazards all contributed to a low morale.

Less than a year later, during an investigation of computer failures in the ATC system, Representative Bob Whitakker (KS) pointed out that the official FAA response to most near misses was that "they chose to blame the controller for the near tragedy and only listed the computer malfunction as a contributing cause." ATC Charles Mullick from Oakland testified that "controllers are now hesitant to report dangerous or possibly dangerous situations for fear of reprisal by the FAA." Mullick added that "the FAA has taken away our second career [the physical ability to pursue another occupation once unable to continue air traffic controlling due to its debilitating effects], our safety reporting program, and a number of freedoms guaranteed under the US Constitution." 38 Such remarks only showed in part the conflicts and confrontations that ATCs experienced daily.

Controllers saw management's abuse of power as affecting not only job performance, but hurting the quality of life away from work. In 1980 testimony to Congress, Poli explained that for workers in larger towers with inadequate staffing "who maybe for 4 or 5 months are working 6 days a week and 10 hours a day, there isn't enough money to pay them for what they have to go through with the disruptions of their family and how it affects them as individuals in the continuing operation of their job." When asked what benefits controllers would hypothetically strike for, Poli responded that fewer hours, better retirement, and improved equipment would be main issues along with "the ability to spend more time with their family . . . if they could work less time so they can be home more, I think that would be a big issue." 39

While Poli may have used this appeal to gain congressional sympathy, the words of controllers during and after the strike demonstrate that the quantity and quality of time away from work was a vital concern to many. One wife described how her husband had gone from "a completely passive person, a guy who was crazy about his job to someone who would jump on you at the drop of a hat." A controller described how "somedays I go home and walk in the door and my wife takes one look at my face--and my clothes, which are sweated through from the neck down--and she doesn't say a word. She sends my son to his room and she makes me a drink and we don't talk for 2 hours." Another added that "my wife says she'd rather have me whole, healthy, and with her than going back to work under the conditions we had." One wife complained that "by the fourth day of a work week, he has no patience and it's almost as though his head is going to explode. Our whole family runs according to Kennedy tower's traffic." Many controllers traced such problems to mandatory overtime and rotating shift work that undermined parenting and neighboring roles. 40

Several responses to a 1984 survey of former controllers saw a better family life as one of the few positive results of the strike. One wrote that "I regained a family that I had lost by working w-ends, holiday, and night shifts. I have learned to communicate with my family now, as I had no time for family life as an ATC. My wife and children have related to me many times how [much] easier I am to get along with . . ." Another simply stated, "Family situation vastly improved," and a third that "this was the greatest thing I have ever done for my family. We get along better, no drinking problem. Health problems have disappeared. Better relationship with friends and new friends are easier to make." 41 Obviously, ATCs understood and resented the costs of management's power.

In 1983, Congress began to ask controllers to testify in hearings on the ATC system. One controller who testified wrote a telling letter to the chairman of the subcommittee immediately after the hearings had ended: "The way Mr. Helms [the chairman of the FAA] slanted his testimony against the Washington Center controllers, it was as if to make them feel ashamed for taking their annual leave. . . . we as controllers should not be boxed into a canyon of workload that makes us feel less of a human

being if we don't take on unsafe volumes of traffic and risk our health by gleefully working all the overtime. It is not normal and for Mr. Helms to denigrate those of us for taking our leave (that we've earned) proves my point that they now 'expect' us to be supermen."42

Dr. David Bowers who helped conduct research for the Jones report related what one controller who had not been a member of PATCO and not gone on strike had told him: "He said that in the days leading up to it [the strike], the management divided them into two kinds of people: good guys and bad guys. The good guys were management, team supervisors, and the controllers who were known would not go on strike. There was the honeymoon period in the immediate wake of the strike, 2 or 3 weeks or whatever . . . of teamwork and good relationships. [Then] he said, suddenly, they woke up and the world was divided into good guys and bad guys again. This time, the managers were the good guys and the bad guys were team supervisors and controllers." 43

Hearings in 1989 brought more of the same sorts of protests and allegations. A 1988 GAO survey included the words of one supervisor who explained that "employee input is not really being sought out and that budget constraints make permanent changes and station moves practically impossible . . . [moreover] drug testing [which had recently been instituted] being performed on a work force with no history of drug-related errors and accidents [is] professionally insulting." The report also set forth the view of one controller as widely representative of the workforce as a whole: "Morale is horrible, traffic is intolerable, management insensitive. We are overworked, understaffed, and abused. We even have a supervisor who says you can't stand up to relieve the tension and ache after spending 2-1/2 plus hours at a sector by yourself without any help. . . . Worst of all--nothing will change after this survey. Too bad." Numerous controllers repeated this last sentiment. 44

Finally, Steve Bell, president of the newly formed union, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) testified:

> It is no wonder that NATCA won certification and that we now have half of the workforce as members. The FAA was the best recruiting tool around. Controllers were feeling helpless in the face of this disinterested monolith. NATCA gives them the only opportunity to effect meaningful and lasting change. . . .
>
> It is as if FAA managers are absentee landlords who had no idea what their tenants are complaining about . . . And as with an absentee landlord, we will probably get little relief." 45

It was the imposition of management control over all aspects of a worker's life--the effect of overtime on job performance and outside lives, the arbitrary/short notice of overtime demand, inability to obtain sick leave or take breaks, a lack of clear job definitions and responsibilities, the facility and practice of perceived unfair managerial reprisal--against which ATCs continued to fight almost ten years after 11,400 workers struck--and were fired--for the same reason. As Harley Shaiken writes, "these seemingly picayune squabbles, are in reality, disputes over more fundamental questions of power and job security. The real issue is who will organize work on the shop floor,"46 and, by extension, life away from the shop floor.

The FAA's responses to the controllers' grievances and repeated congressional reprimands and recommendations demonstrate perhaps even more dramatically the degree to which control over labor may influence managerial actions; for asserting FAA control was not a question of profit, but in fact posed a blatant threat to public safety. That members of the agency were willing to take such a risk by consistently ignoring controllers' obviously valid criticism, such as faulty equipment, demonstrates an

awareness of the challenge that the controllers presented and a refusal to give up any part of their authority.

The FAA's handling of the strike is the most obvious proof of its outlook. Rather than reopen talks, the FAA instead maintained air travel using an overworked, undertrained, skeletal workforce. It, too, denied the legitimacy of workers' grievances, refused to negotiate working conditions, and dismissed the strikers as "chronic complainers and crybabies." Deliberate underreporting to Congress and the public of near-misses and other safety violations since the strike also showed the extent to which the FAA was willing to violate its mandate to ensure safety in air travel in order to maintain control over its labor force.47

In addition, the FAA immediately intensified efforts to automate the system more fully in order to decrease its reliance on trained skilled controllers and monitor workers' actions. One example that instigated tremendous controller protest was the implementation of computers designed to record operational errors. The FAA claimed that the purpose of this program was to detect unreported errors and thereby promote safety. The "squeal-a-deal" or "snitch machine" as it became known, reported any error, no matter how insignificant, immediately to a supervisor. Despite the supposed immunity from reprisal, supervisors and managers then exercised enormous discretion in recording and reprimanding such errors.

Controllers saw the implementation of drug testing as yet another way in which the FAA displayed its distrust of, disrespect for, and control over workers, as did its use of a Survey Feedback Action Program. While the Agency said that the purpose of the survey was to "give every employee a chance to identify problems and also have a voice in correcting them," after collecting the supposedly anonymous responses, the FAA returned the original comment sheets in the controllers' own handwriting to the facility managers, thereby destroying all confidentiality. NAFTA president Steve Bell noted that:

> The ramifications are obvious. Controllers who were critical of management and facility policies were identified and could now be subject to prejudicial treatment. Reprisals can be very subtle such as watch schedules, Performance Evaluations, promotions and transfers, etc. The breach in confidentiality also means that controllers will think twice about ever filling out one of these forms again.48

Perhaps the best evidence of the depth of the struggle between FAA management and the air traffic controllers for control of the workplace is the remarkable similarities of the workers' complaints, despite years of congressional investigations, recommendations and supposed improvements. As a GAO representative explained to Congress in 1986, "in reviewing the written comments, one of the things that surprised us was the fact that you really could not discern a difference between the comments of a relatively new controller, one hired since the strike, and one who has been around the system for quite a few years. The tone was virtually the same. The issues were the same. We were quite surprised about that."49

The most recent survey of air traffic controllers, completed by 80% of the workforce in 1988, led the GAO to conclude that "the same problem areas that the GAO recognized in 1984, and many of the same problems that contributed to the controllers' strike in 1981 still plague the ATC system." Congressman Guy Molinari (NY) added that "the most salient point of the GAO report . . . shows . . . the perceptions of management and controllers are worlds apart. It is hard to understand how facility managers and controllers in the same building perceive work conditions so differently." 50

David Montgomery has pointed out that "the battle for control of the workplace neither began nor ended in the opening years of this century."[51] Although technology, management theory, modes of production, labor's position, and cultural views of work and workers have all changed the appearance and terms of this struggle for power, the fundamental conflict remains the same. These same changes in society, though, have also served to overshadow this dispute, leaving it, at least in the case of the air traffic controllers, unaddressed and unresolved. Nevertheless, controllers clearly saw, if only indirectly, this problem and understood it as vitally linked to their broader expectations and aspirations of life and work. Thus inspired, in 1981 13,000 of them risked job security, income, and arrest to reassert this right, and less than ten years later a new group of workers created a union to better continue the struggle for control.

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Notes for "The Pressures of PATCO"

1. R. Magnuson et al., "Turbulence in the Tower," *Time*, 8/17/81, p. 17; Arthur Shostak and David Skocik, *The Air Controllers' Controversy: Lessons from the PATCO Strike* (NY: Human Sciences Press, 1986), p. 68.

2. The importance of ATCs to public safety and their position as federal employees led to numerous congressional hearings in which air controllers voiced their concerns. Government organizations, FAA-commissioned panels, and PATCO also conducted detailed studies and surveys of the air traffic control workforce, compiling rich sources of data from which it is possible to elicit the views of air controllers and management.

3. Ronald Howard, *Brave New Workplace* (NY: Viking, 1985), p. 7. See, for instance, Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (NY: Basic Books, 1984).

4. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Stephen Wood et al, *The Degradation of Work?* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 13-14.

5. See David Noble, *Forces of Production* (NY: Knopf, 1984); Harley Shaiken, *Work Transformed* (NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1985); Barbara Garson, *The Electronic Sweatshop* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Howard, *Brave New Workplace*.

6. *Hearings* 1983-1984, p. 1372; Shostak, p. 138.

7. Howard, pp. 251, 253.

8. Shostak, p. 54.

9. Shostak, p. 97-98.

10. Shostak, p. 98. It is worth noting that at the same time that the FAA refused to employ more ATCs to handle the growing volume of air traffic, the number of FAA managers hired increased considerably.

11. Howell Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 27.

12. Garson, p. 13.

13. Hoo-min D. Toong and Amar Gupta, "Automating Air-Traffic Control," *Technology Review*, April 1982, p. 54.

14. Robert Wesson et al., ÒScenarios for Evolution of Air Traffic ControlÓ (Monograph, Rand, R-2698- FAA, November 1981), p. 2.

15. The FAA was in all likelihood probably not purposefully risking the safety of air travel, but instead used rationalizations to deny this effect and justify their efforts to maintain their authority such as asserting that the ATC system had been overstaffed before the strike and so there was no need to hire additional workers.

16. U. S. Congress, Committee on Public Works and Transportation, *Rebuilding of the Nation's Air Traffic Control System (Has Safety Taken a Back Seat to Expediency?)* (Washington: U.S. Government, 1985), pp. 55-56

17. Ibid., p. 59.

18. Shostak, p. 102.

19. Ibid., p. 82.

20. Stanley Aronowitz, *Working Class Hero* (NY: Adena Books, 1983), p. 68.

21. Ibid., p. 67.

22. It should be noted that the average salary for controllers at the time of the strike was $31,000. Shostak, p. 114; David Morgan, "Terminal Flight: The Air Traffic Controllers' Strike of 1981," *Journal of American Studies* (August 1984), p. 175.

23. *Hearings* 1983-1984, pp. 222, 228, 259.

24. *Hearings* 1981, p. 190; David Bowers, "What Would Make 11,500 People Quit Their Jobs?," *Organizational Dynamics* (Winter 1983), p. 8.

25. *Newsweek* 8/17/81, p. 23; *New York Times* 8/4/81, p. A-1; *Los Angeles Times* 8/6/81, p. 1-1.

26. *Hearings* 1981, p. 15.

27. Shostak, p. 90.

28. Ibid., p. 91.

29. Howard, p. 89.

30. Phil Keisling, "Money Over What Really Mattered," *Washington Monthly* (September 1983), p. 16. Keisling went on to condemn the controllers as preoccupied with their own comfort and security and allowing economic interests to overwhelm legitimate ones such as too much traffic at peak hours.

31. Bowers, p. 16, 17.

32. *Hearings* 1981, pp. 524, 521.

33. *Hearings* 1983-1984, p. 459.

34. *New York Times* 8/6/81, p. D-21; Shostak, p. 96.

35. Shostak, p. 22.

36. Several studies of the air traffic controllers have examined the personalities of the people making up the ATC workforce. The Rose Report, in particular, looked closely at psychological make-ups when it tried to determine the presence and cause of stress. It found that in general ATCs "are highly intelligent men who control their anxieties by meticulous compulsive behavior, men who--though they tend to be bold and dominant individuals by nature and have no great intrinsic respect either for authority or regulations--are nevertheless, as members of a closely working team, group conforming by necessity." (*Hearings* 1983- 1984, p. 968) The study also found that many controllers had an intense and chronic feeling of alienation from their FAA managers and hated the supervisory system. They believed the FAA would scapegoat them if anything went wrong, but, "as people who take pride in their job, they take pride in not being intimidated." (Shostak, p. 23) Indeed, many observers have pointed to the collective psychological profile of ATCs as a critical component in the decision to strike. A tendency to take action and a disdain for authority made a dramatic statement likely whereas another workforce might have opted for a different method of protest. Undoubtedly, the FAA's style of management and refusal to compromise or make changes aggravated the situation as well. The FAA's behavior during the contract negotiations was the final straw.

37. *Hearings* 1979, p. 250; *Hearings* 1981, p. 3.

38. *Hearings* 1980, pp. 28, 5.

39. *Hearings* 1980, pp. 24, 25.

40. *Chicago Tribune* 8/6/81, p. 1; *New York Times* 8/13/81, p A-1; Shostak, pp. 21-25.

41. Shostak, pp. 145, 149.

42. Ibid., p. 282.

43. Ibid., p. 1221.

44. *Hearings* 1989, pp. 11, 20.

45. Ibid., pp. 128, 47, 119.

46. Shaiken, p. 32.

47. Shostak, pp. 184-185.

48. Hearings 1989, p. 136.

49. *Hearings* 1986, p. 28.

50. *Hearings* 1989, p. 3. For a more recent look at the safety of air travel which is very critical of the FAA, see "How Safe Is This Flight?" *Newsweek* 4/24/95, pp. 18-28.

51. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control In America* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1979), p. 4.