A BLANK CHECK FOR REAGAN: PUBLIC OPINION AND THE 1981 PATCO STRIKE

Joel Smollett, Sr.

On October 20, 1980, the Republican candidate for president, Ronald Reagan was near the end of his campaign. On that day he sent a letter to Robert Poli, the president of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). Poli's union represented air controllers nationwide. In his letter, Reagan contended that he had been told of the difficulties the workers faced, including too few people working unreasonable hours with obsolete equipment. Reagan ended his sympathetic note to Poli with a clear promise, "I pledge to you that my administration will work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the President and the air traffic controllers."[124] Less than ten months later, and after just six months in office, President Reagan fired almost the entire air traffic controller workforce and destroyed PATCO.

Reagan's actions in response to 13,000 striking air traffic controllers in August 1981, were not only shocking to most observers, but established a turning point in modern U.S. labor history. In the years that followed, the firing and permanent replacement of striking workers became common in the United States. But how did different segments of American society, particularly organized labor and the general American public, view the firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981 by President Reagan? This paper will show that overwhelming public support enabled

[124] Coalition of Flight Attendants, Letter from Ronald Reagan to Robert Poli, Display Ad 116, *New York Times,* August 16, 1981.

the president to take such action and gave him an opportunity to assert his power over organized labor.

The historiography of the PATCO strike seems to focus on the question of responsibility for the outcome. While some accounts provide useful chronologies of the events leading up to, during, and after the strike, they conclude that both sides missed opportunities to resolve their differences.[125] Others place most of the blame on PATCO and previous government equivocation.[126] This paper avoids judgments on who was right or wrong about specific strike issues, and focuses instead on how public opinion enabled President Reagan to act in the manner he did. But understanding the issues is still critical.

The key demands of the union revolved around three issues, the first being wages. In 1980, controllers earned from $20,462 to $49,229 a year.[127] Those working at small airports were paid the least, while starting pay at New York, Chicago or Los Angeles was $37,000. PATCO was bargaining for a $10,000 raise for all controllers and a cost-of-living increase twice a year. The government, in this case the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), offered a $4,000 raise.[128] The salaries of controllers compared favorably with the income of other federal employees, since the average controller made $33,000 a year while the average federal worker earned $21,452.[129] These figures are important because they establish that PATCO members were already among the better-paid U.S. government workers, who nevertheless believed they were entitled to even greater compensation. This puzzling aspect may be clarified more fully by their demands regarding the workweek.

The second issue, the workweek, was based on the view that air traffic control working conditions were extremely stressful. Controllers stared at radarscopes for many hours, often guiding ten airplanes at once.[130] As clinical psychologist Barry Beder stated, "[o]ne five-second error can lead to the loss of hundreds of lives." Beder described controllers as the most stressed group he had treated, "more than auto

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125 See Willis J. Nordlund, *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Controllers' Strike* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998). Michael A.Round, *Grounded: Reagan and the PATCO Crash* (New York: Garland, 1999).

126 Herbert R. Northrup, "The Rise and Demise of PATCO," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 37, no. 2 (1984): 167-184.

127 Ed Magnuson, "Turbulence in the Tower," *Time Magazine,* August 17, 1981, http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,949316,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

128 Ibid.

129 Robert A. Rosenblatt, "Average $33,000 for Stressful Work: Air Controllers Earn More Than Most On U.S. Payroll," *Los Angeles Times,* August 5, 1981.

130 Magnuson, "Turbulence in the Tower."

executives . . . nurses, teachers, police, more than airline pilots."[131] PATCO, therefore, demanded that the workweek be reduced from 40 hours to 32 hours. The FAA was open to some reduction in hours, as long as there was a commensurate reduction in pay.

Finally, the third demand over retirement was based on similar factors of job stress and early burnout. Controllers who feared they would suffer stress-related medical disabilities were supported by union statistics, showing 90 percent of all controllers retired early due to medical reasons.[132] Controllers were also required to pass an annual physical exam to keep their medical certification. Failure to get a medical clearance could force them to retire.[133] PATCO wanted retirement after twenty years of service and retirement pay of 75 percent of base salary. The government offered no change from the existing rules, that is retirement after twenty-five years and pension income of 50 percent of base wages.[134]

Although extreme stress, as a characteristic of the job itself, helped to legitimize demands for a reduction in the workweek and a change in retirement rules, conditions at the workplace exacerbated that stress. For example, although air traffic escalated after the de-regulation of the airlines in 1978, and the workload increased greatly, the FAA did not modernize its equipment. Robert Poole, who had spent seven years in the aerospace industry, stated in 1981 that "whatever the wisdom of the controllers' strike, the facts are on their side when they complain of the inadequacies of today's air traffic control system. Study after study has documented the FAA's failure to plan, manage or operate the system in a competent, state-of-the-art manner."[135] Also, a climate of worker-management conflict had developed at many of the FAA facilities throughout the country. A study commissioned by the FAA in the mid-1970s and conducted by Boston University found that 80 percent of controllers did not believe good job performance was rewarded or could lead to promotion. They felt they received very little support from management.[136] In March 1980, union members were being punished for

[131] William Henry III, "Take This Job and Love It," *Time Magazine,* August 17, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,949317,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

[132] James Barron, "Local 201: Firm Stand for Strike," *New York Times*, August 5, 1981.

[133] Lorraine Branham, "Poor Morale Held Root of Controllers' Strike," *Baltimore Sun*, August 6, 1981, folder "Air Traffic Controllers' Strike (1 of 3)," box CFOA 81-86, Martin Anderson Files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

[134] "Key Issues in the Walkout," *New York Times*, August 6, 1981.

[135] Robert Poole, "Maybe It's Time to Dismiss the FAA," *New York Times,* August 16, 1981.

[136] Richard W. Hurd, "How PATCO Was Led Into a Trap," *Nation* 233 (December 1981): 696-8.

minor work rules violations while non-members at the workplace were not. (Unlike many private sector closed shops, the government is an open shop where an employee is not required to join the union). In June of that year, the chief of the Oakland, California facility declared on talk radio that "PATCO did not care about air traffic safety."[137] The tensions building on both sides contributed to stress on the job.

In most healthy relationships, it is often the case that both parties share some responsibility for maintaining harmony. But in the workplace, due to their greater power, management has a more influential role in creating the preconditions that ensure a respectful and productive work environment. Yet FAA management had failed in its responsibility for many years. This fact was illustrated, for example, as early as 1970, when Senator Hiram L. Fong explained in a U.S. Senate report, that a card dealer at a Las Vegas casino is given a break every 40 minutes "because of the monotony and mental stress of keeping up with a deck of cards," while air traffic controllers, who "move airplanes in and out of a busy airport will frequently remain on a radarscope for 4 hours without relief . . ."[138] Therefore, although the issues in the PATCO strike were about pay, the workweek, and retirement, less tangible issues, such as workplace conditions and respect, were just as significant. Air controller and author David Skocik contends that the majority of his co-workers were Vietnam-era veterans who gained their experience in the military. His advice to FAA management regarding the poor treatment of his fellow air traffic controllers was "one does not deal with self-motivated, highly competent people through threats – not, at least, if one is truly interested in efficiency."[139] But the two sides were at an impasse.

On August 3, 1981 at 10:55 a.m. EDT, President Ronald Reagan read a statement to reporters in the Rose Garden at the White House. He was responding to the strike by air traffic controllers which began at 7 a.m. that morning. Reagan made it clear that government employees do not have the right to strike and that when they were hired, controllers had taken an oath not to strike. The president ended his statement with a warning, "I must tell those who fail to report for duty this morning they are in violation of the law, and if they do not report for work within 48

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137 Ibid.

138 Willis J. Nordlund, *Silent Skies: The Air Traffic Controllers' Strike* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 98.

139 Arthur B. Shostak and David Skocik, *The Air Controllers' Controversy: Lessons from the PATCO Strike* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), 99.

hours, they have forfeited their jobs and will be terminated."[140] Two days later, PATCO continued to defy the president as he was holding a morning meeting with Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis. At the meeting, Reagan reaffirmed his intention to fire controllers who ignored his ultimatum.[141] The president then carried out his threat. This was a man who was as tough as he claimed to be. But to understand him, it is helpful to look at some events in his life.

Ronald Reagan was raised in the small town of Dixon, Illinois, along the Mississippi River. "Character building, pride in country, and the work ethic," formed the foundation of his education, according to historian Robert Dallek.[142] As a movie actor in Hollywood, he played mostly light, romantic leads and adventure roles. During World War II, Reagan was ineligible for combat due to poor eyesight, but he served in an Army Air Corps film unit in Hollywood.[143] His experience in making movies influenced his later life. Throughout his public career, notes historian Michael Schaller, "Reagan told stories of pilgrims, patriots, cowboys, and rugged individualists who existed more in movie scripts than in real life."[144] As governor of California, Reagan commented on the notion of "complex" problems, "[t]he truth is, there are simple answers – there just are not easy ones."[145] Clearly, Reagan was a man who valued decisive action and toughness. As such he was less likely to be receptive to concepts such as negotiation and compromise. In fact, the Speaker of the House at the time, Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, said Reagan "doesn't know the art of compromise. He's a tough, two-fisted person . . ."[146]

Reagan plainly refused to consider alternatives in his Rose Garden announcement on August 3, 1981. Asked why had he decided on such a drastic move as his *first* action and not some lesser step, the president

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140 "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on the Air Traffic Controllers Strike August 3, 1981." *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/80381a.htm (accessed May 5, 2009).

141 Penny Pagano and David Treadwell, "Controllers Defy New U.S. Warning," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1981.

142 Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4.

143 Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7-8.

144 Ibid.

145 Dallek, 39.

146 Richard Witkin, "World Air Group Puts Off Any Call For New Boycotts," *New York Times*, August 14, 1981.

replied, "[w]hat lesser action can there be? The law is very explicit."[147] For Reagan, standing up to PATCO was a matter of moral clarity. It demonstrated his ability to face a challenge head on. According to O'Neill, even the Soviets were impressed by his will of steel.[148] The White House communications director, David R. Gergen, told a journalist at the time, "I can't recall a time when I've seen him as emphatic as he is on this issue."[149] The president maintained that he respected the right of workers in the private sector to strike, but "government cannot close down the assembly line. It has to provide without interruption the protective services which are government's reason for being."[150] Reagan formulated his actions on his own. This is significant because since he left office it has often been alleged that Reagan was a hands-off administrator. (At least that was the explanation offered about his role during the Iran-Contra scandal.) But in the PATCO strike, Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis explained that President Reagan gave him three instructions: there would be no amnesty, no negotiations during the strike, and no future government jobs for fired workers.[151] The president directed the Justice Department to file an action in federal court to impound PATCO's $3.5 million strike fund, and also asked the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) to decertify the union as the representative of the air traffic controllers.[152] The question arises whether Reagan was acting purely out of principle or whether there were ideological factors involved?

Reagan won the presidency in 1980 because he pledged to bring about huge changes to the country. According to historian Bruce Schulman, "Americans wanted a change, and the New Right offered the only authentic alternative."[153] Many people recall one of Reagan's most memorable lines from his inaugural speech when he said "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Later in the speech he expanded on that concept by insisting that it was time "to get government back within its means . . . and on these principles there will

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147 "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on the Air Traffic Controllers Strike August 3, 1981."

148 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 233.

149 George Skelton, "Experience as Governor, Union Leadership: Reagan's Firm Stance Forged Over Years,"
Los Angeles Times, August 5, 1981.

150 Ibid.

151 "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session."

152 Shostak, 104.

153 Schulman, 215.

be no compromise."[154] Reagan's first budget proposal included radical tax cuts and drastic cuts in social programs. It should not have been unexpected therefore, that he saw the controllers as a small group of "elite workers making unreasonable demands" during a period of budget austerity.[155]

The president's hostility to organized labor angered many in the labor movement who felt that the president's budget favored the rich against the poor and weakened enforcement of industrial health-and-safety laws. Labor leaders also resented the elimination of a law requiring prevailing wages in federally funded construction jobs.[156] Reagan's agenda reflected the same absolute and unwavering traits of his own personality. Richard Nathan, who studied the inner workings of the administration, noted that in order to "maintain ideological purity, cabinet members learned about their departments from conservative task forces rather than from personnel within their agencies."[157] This ensured a disciplined, system-wide adherence to the president's philosophy about reducing the scale of the federal government. Given this context, Reagan's get-tough policy with PATCO was not *simply* a case of a president protecting the public from an illegal strike. It also offered the president a chance to make a larger point about his power over organized labor. All he needed was public support.

It has often been said that Americans root for the underdog. Whether that includes Patriots outnumbered and outclassed by British soldiers during the War for Independence, or a Philadelphia street tough named Rocky Balboa. The U.S. has a tradition (or myth?) of siding with the little guy, the one who has little chance of winning. In a face-off between the most powerful man in the western world and a group of desperate, stressed-out workers, surely the latter would garner national sympathy. However, that was *not* the case in the air traffic controllers strike. A Gallup Poll taken the week of August 14, 1981 showed the American public strongly supported Reagan's firing of the strikers. By a 2-to-1 ratio, those polled backed the president 59 to 30 percent.[158] An

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154 "Inaugural Address January 20, 1981," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan.*

155 Rosenblatt.

156 George J. Church, "Barbs for an Old Union Man," *Time Magazine*, September 14, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924842,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

157 Richard P. Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1983), 75.

158 George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1981* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1982), 208.

Associated Press-NBC News Poll taken at the same time showed even greater support: 64 percent approved of the president's handling of the strike.[159] But it is important to look at the views behind these polls, which, without context, are only raw numbers.

One reason for negative views of the PATCO strike was the public's belief that the strike was illegal. Catherine Hitchcock from Arizona wrote to *Time Magazine* that "a man is only as good as his word" and she "did not want to trust [her] life to anyone who will break a pledge for his own gain." She believed that the controllers "certainly knew what they were swearing to when they took the oath" not to strike.[160] This was a common sentiment as the public drew a distinction between private and public workers. The Gallup Poll cited earlier also found Americans held strong opinions as 68 percent said air traffic controllers should not be permitted to strike and only 28 percent said they should. In polls taken where controllers were not singled out, 55 percent of the public opposed strikes by sanitation workers, 64 percent were against strikes by postal workers, 69 percent opposed strikes by policemen and 70 percent thought firemen should not be permitted to strike.[161] When it comes to public safety, the majority of Americans were not prepared to grant the right to strike to those who they believed had special obligations. The public, however, did not always feel as strongly about this question. According to Gallup, in 1975 only 52 percent of those polled opposed a policeman's right to strike. That number grew to 61 percent in 1978 and finally to 69 percent in August 1981.[162] It appears that the nation became increasingly conservative in those years, or perhaps less tolerant of the notion that government employees have the same rights as those in the private sector. By 1981, most people in the U.S. felt the air traffic controllers were breaking the law. For example, J. Earl Burrell from Pennsylvania sent a telegram to President Reagan saying he "applauds and supports [the] administration's vigorous efforts to terminate this illegal strike."[163] Reagan's statement in the Rose Garden, drawing a clear difference between the right of private sector employees and public employees to strike, had overwhelming support.

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159 "Most in Poll Oppose Public Worker Strikes," *New York Times,* August 16, 1981.

160 Catherine Hitchcock, letter to the editors, "Air Controllers," *Time Magazine,* September 7, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924785,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

161 Gallup, 207.

162 Ibid.

163 Letter, J. Earl Burrell to Ronald Reagan, August 4, 1981, ID# 036051, PE001, White House Office of Records Management: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

Another negative view of the strikers reflected popular resentment toward the salaries air traffic controllers received, considered high by many in the general public. Judith Richards of Alabama wrote to *Time* scolding the fired controllers: "[w]elcome to the private sector. Jobs that pay $30,000 a year are rare. Social Security taxes are outrageously high. Retirement plans are not so generous." With a final sting she added, "You will constantly be angry as the government takes your money to pay exorbitant salaries and perquisites."[164] It is possible to see these expressions of disdain as an indication of a larger disapproval of organized labor among the general public. That statement would be difficult to prove, however, when one recalls that 64% of the American people supported Reagan's firing of the controllers but, according to Gallup, only 35 percent of those polled disapproved of labor unions.[165] So while $33,000 in average annual wages for controllers was higher than most federal employees, there is not enough evidence to conclude that the majority of the general public, including Ms. Richards resented unions as well.

Individual expressions of support for President Reagan suggest that anger over union power *was* the motivating factor for some. For example, in a telegram to the White House, the Chairman of the Board of Avon Products, Inc., David W. Mitchell, wrote, "[t]otally support your stand with the air traffic controllers. Urge you to stick to your convictions."[166] One could speculate that as the head of a company that requires large numbers of self-employed individuals working for commission only, Mr. Mitchell may have had some animosity toward organized labor. The same may be true for Robert L. Madeira who also sent a telegram to President Reagan. Mr. Madeira, speaking for the 2,500 delegates assembled at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee for the 42nd annual American Convention of Meat Processors, proclaimed, "[w]e hereby go on record as strongly supporting the action that you have taken in connection with the air controllers strike."[167] As an industry, meat processing is not known for paying its workers high wages and Madeira may have wanted to keep it that way with the help of Ronald Reagan.

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164 Judith Richards, letter to the editors, "Air Controllers," *Time Magazine*, September 7, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924785,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

165 Gallup, 207.

166 Letter, David W. Mitchell to Ronald Reagan, August 6, 1981, ID# 036055, PE001, White House Office of Records Management: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

167 Letter, Robert L. Madeira to Ronald Reagan, August 4, 1981, ID# 036052, PE001, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

Support for Reagan came from people in leading economic positions and some spoke out to protect their interests. For example, Kermit Francis, the president of the National Public Employers Labor Relations Association in Chicago sent a telegram to the White House on behalf of the chief negotiators for over 700 state, county, and municipal governments. He said, "I would like to express our full support for your action. The precedence you are setting will have significant, positive consequences in all our jurisdictions."[168] This was a clear case of not only a statement of support, but a reminder to the president that his victory over the air controllers would provide substantial benefits to a key group of constituents. It is difficult to imagine anything more valuable to Mr. Francis' organization than being able to negotiate with public employees who would not dare to consider a strike option to win better contracts, out of fear of losing their jobs.

A diverse block of Reagan supporters included the powerful Mr. Francis but also some surprises from labor. The Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) did not support the air traffic controllers strike. "Perhaps the biggest sellout came from the ALPA," said Skocik.[169] The pilots continued to fly while Reagan and the FAA replaced striking workers with a smaller staff of supervisors, military and non-union controllers. The negative opinions some pilots expressed illustrate their attitudes about air controllers. F. Denis King, a first officer for American Airlines declared, "[t]he pilots don't want the controllers back, and we do not feel unsure about the safety of the sky." He also said that air controllers "can't bribe or blackmail the United States ... [and] President Reagan showed strength when others have shown weakness."[170] Another pilot, Frank Powell of Alabama, wrote to *Time Magazine*: "I have been a pilot and a controller. Comparing the stress and responsibility of the two jobs is like contrasting pro football quarterbacks with sportswriters."[171] Mr. King also belittled PATCO complaints about stress on the job, which was a key part of the union's argument for improved pay and benefits. "Perhaps they can't handle stress of any kind, and should be sweeping floors or cutting grass," said Mr. King.[172] These statements do not necessarily make the air

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168 Letter, Kermit Francis to Ronald Reagan, August 5, 1981, ID# 036061, PE001, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

169 Shostak, 115.

170 Bob Greene, "A Pilot's View: We're Better Off Without PATCO Rowdies," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1981.

171 Frank Powell, letter to the editors, "Air Controllers," *Time Magazine,* September 7, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924785,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

172 Greene.

controller grievances less legitimate. But the pilots' remarks do highlight what was a diverse constituency in Reagan's corner as he triumphed over the air traffic controllers.

On Tuesday, August 4, the day after PATCO called the strike and President Reagan issued his warning in the Rose Garden to the controllers, the White House announced that it had already received 4,893 calls or telegrams in support of the president's actions and only 239 sympathized with the strikers.[173] Some people had a problem with using that as a scientific sample of public opinion. One such person was Allan M. Sear from South Carolina who wrote to the *New York Times* to complain, "Insofar as there are over 220 million Americans, Mr. Reagan's 'poll' represented less than 9 millionths [sic] of all Americans."[174] Indeed, if one were to do the math, the White House numbers come out to 95.3 percent in favor of Reagan's actions and only 4.7 percent against. Those are very different results than Gallup (59 percent in favor) and AP-NBC News (64 percent in favor). There are various reasons why the White House numbers could be so dissimilar, but Mr. Sear probably had the most interesting explanation, "[a] few persistent crackpots could easily tie up the telephone lines to the White House in order to express their support for the President . . ."[175]

The views of those who supported the air traffic controllers represented a smaller segment of the population. But that minority did express their opinions. Veronique Sabl of Los Angeles wrote to *Time Magazine* arguing that, "[c]ondemning air controllers to lifelong banishment from their chosen profession for an admittedly reprehensible act of defiance is out of proportion." She thought the controllers should be rehired and that loss of seniority and several months' pay would be adequate punishment.[176] Although PATCO would probably have disagreed that the strike was a reprehensible act, Ms. Sabl does offer a nuanced opinion on what could have been a more appropriate and proportional response from the president. The larger question is why didn't *more* Americans believe that Reagan should have considered alternatives to mass firing? It is possible to speculate the sheer power derived from his leadership style – a tough and decisive personality, a charismatic and charming individual – was enough to choke off other

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173 Skelton.

174 Allan M. Sear, letter to the editors, *New York Times,* August 16, 1981.

175 Ibid.

176 Veronique Sabl, letter to the editors, *Time Magazine*, November 23, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,922685,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

options. But the president did not have everyone convinced that he was acting thoughtfully.

One concern that the Reagan administration certainly should have expected was public anxiety over safety. Audrey Rothe from Ohio wrote to *Time Magazine*, "[s]o President Reagan feels 'badly' about stripping 13,000 people of their livelihood. Isn't that touching? Does he feel as 'badly' about jeopardizing thousands of air travelers' lives as a result of his irresponsible decision?"[177] Years after the strike, there is still a debate as to whether safety in the skies was compromised because of Reagan's actions. A sample of that debate at the time included the President of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations, a Canadian named Harry Henschler. He endorsed PATCO's position that travel in U.S. airspace was not safe since air traffic control had been mostly taken over "by unqualified personnel."[178] Meanwhile, the FAA was trying to persuade the public that the air traffic control system was sound (although several years later, in July 1984, only 9,841 controllers had full performance ratings compared with 13,133 before the strike).[179] But the Reagan administration insisted that flight operations were at least as safe as they were before the strike. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore that many in the public *felt* less safe because of the president's actions. It is little wonder that Mutual of Omaha reported that sales of flight insurance had soared 25 percent after the strike began.[180]

The most vocal critic of Reagan's handling of the air traffic controllers' strike was organized labor. It included a diverse set of views that could be classified as ranging from moderate to outrage. One moderate voice was that of Lawrence C. Cushing, the President of the National Association of Air Traffic Specialists. Mr. Cushing represented workers at flight service stations who were involved in flight communications, weather reports to aircraft, etc., but did not control air traffic. He sent a telegram to President Reagan urging him to reconsider his "fire/no rehire policy" and replace it with "a measured amnesty" for the controllers. He also stated that "the present head to head confrontation between the U.S. government and PATCO must be moderated" before

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177 Audrey Rothe, letter to the editors, "Air Controllers," *Time Magazine*, September 7, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924785,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

178 Witkin.

179 "Unfriendly Skies," *Time Magazine*, July 23, 1984, http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,952436,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

180 "Fear of Flying," *Time Magazine*, August 31, 1981, http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,954931,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

progress can be made.[181] Moe Biller, the President of the American Postal Workers Union, sent a similarly worded telegram to the White House, advising the president that "punitive measures are no substitute for fair dealing with PATCO" and that postal workers support PATCO's position that dialogue and "an end to repressive or vengeful government policies" are needed.[182] Both Mr. Cushing and Mr. Biller represented public employees so it was unlikely that either one of them would engage in heated rhetoric. They had their own future labor contracts to be concerned about and it is fair to assume that they would not have wanted to provoke the anger of the Reagan administration. Their statements were probably as strong as they could be under the circumstances. Unions in the private sector did not have to operate under these kinds of limitations.

Private sector unions were able to voice real outrage. For example, the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants represented 7,000 flight attendants employed by Trans World Airlines. Their president, Arthur Teolis, sent a telegram to President Reagan stating that his members "were appalled that the government would attempt to resolve the differences between the parties by threats and abuse of governmental power...." Teolis also accused Reagan of endangering the travelling public and airline employees in order to achieve "governmental political objectives."[183] That is certainly a much different tone than that taken by the public employee unions and challenging President Reagan's motives took some courage.

Other union leaders and organizations expressed outrage at Reagan's tactics in the air controllers' strike. At a rally of 400 union workers at Kennedy Airport in New York that included firefighters, teachers, autoworkers, longshoremen, garment workers and transit workers, Tom Spence of Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union asserted, "the administration's attack on PATCO is a threat to all unions." Larry Ingram of the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks said Reagan was "against all workers regardless of industry."[184] Union voices assembled at a rally are just as legitimate as those conveyed in Gallup Polls, telegrams, letters to magazines and spoken by politicians and the

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[181] Letter, Lawrence C. Cushing to Ronald Reagan, August 5, 1981, ID# 036048, PE001, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[182] Letter, Moe Biller to Ronald Reagan, August 5, 1981, ID# 036047, PE001, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[183] Letter, Arthur Teolis to Ronald Reagan, August 5, 1981, ID# 036049, PE001, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[184] Dorothy J. Gaiter, "400 Join in a Rally at Kennedy for Controllers," *New York Times*, August 16, 1981.

media. Too often, group protests are labeled as just "special interest groups" making it easier to dismiss their opinions. Also defending the controllers was Ira Glasser, the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) who concluded, "[p]ublic discomfort or inconvenience is not a sufficient justification for limiting or penalizing the right to strike."[185]

Meanwhile, in Washington D.C., AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland told the federation of 103 unions (representing 15 million workers) that Reagan administration policies were "a radical counterrevolution to undo the progress of half a century." Kirkland left the decision to support PATCO up to individual unions, not the federation. But he did personally join pickets at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago a day earlier. Marching with a picket sign, he declared that the strike "cannot be solved by brutal force and the might of the federal government."[186] One should not, however, assume that the workers represented by AFL-CIO unions opposed Ronald Reagan. Despite Kirkland's power as head of the federation, and his strong opinions, a sizable 49 percent of American labor union members, according to Gallup, supported Reagan's actions during the strike.[187] But Reagan's policies toward labor, including his actions against PATCO, were having a negative effect on his support among union workers.

At a Chicago convention in September 1981 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Reagan addressed 3,000 delegates that gave him, according to George Church of *Time Magazine*, "the minimum of tepid applause required by politeness and respect to his office."[188] At the meeting, the president tried to warm up the crowd by telling a humorous story from his youth when he almost dropped a pickax on his boss at a summer construction job. He also reminded the delegation that he was once president of a union (the Screen Actors Guild). A union member at the meeting, Andrew Sarno from Boston, was not impressed, stating frankly "I don't think he should have been allowed to come here."[189] The views of the workers in the hall that day are noteworthy because they do not represent expressions of moderation *or* outrage, but a seething anger and disgust. They believed that due to Reagan-era policies,

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185 "ACLU Defends Controllers, Compares Reagan to a Union-Busting Employer," *Los Angeles Times,* August 5, 1981.

186 "Anti-Reagan Stance Urged by Kirkland," *Los Angeles Times,* August 6, 1981.

187 Gallup, 208.

188 Church.

189 Ibid.

the gains that organized labor had struggled for were being swept away. But even worse developments for them and their families still lay ahead.

Several aspects of the air traffic controllers' strike had ramifications for American labor well into the future. For example, the unilateral decision by management to stop bargaining in good faith to resolve the issues. During the PATCO strike, Reagan chose to ignore the workers who continued to picket at airport radar centers. Instead he simply declared, "there is no strike.... What they did was terminate their own employment by quitting."[190] To many in organized labor, that was absurd. But it was something for which they had no answer and, therefore, were unable to react to effectively. Charles H. Rehmus, the dean of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, and an expert on collective bargaining in government agencies, concluded after the administration admitted that the controllers had some legitimate grievances, "[i]t's the height of amateur hour for the President to say we won't talk to these people ... [and] it's absolutely unbelievable that a man who admits the employees have reasonable discontents would not sit at a collective bargaining table and try to resolve them."[191] But with public support, Reagan was able to ignore previous practice – and the controllers' grievances as well.

Another aspect of the PATCO strike that had long-range consequences was the hiring of permanent replacement workers to fill the jobs of the striking controllers. Reagan's forty- eight-hour ultimatum when the strike began convinced only 1,260 workers to return to their jobs nationwide. In addition, the numbers of supervisors, non-union controllers and military controllers were still too small to replace the fired controllers. The FAA addressed the problem by running a triple-shift, six-day weekly training schedule in Oklahoma City where some of the people seeking to become controllers would eventually be hired as permanent replacements for striking PATCO workers.[192] The air traffic controller' strike is well known to members of organized labor for its groundbreaking use of permanent replacement workers. Three other strikes that followed soon after were the Greyhound Bus strike in 1983, the Eastern Airlines strike in 1989, and the Caterpillar strike in 1992. All three also gained notoriety for the same reason: the use of permanent replacement workers by the companies. But several lesser-known strikes also took place in the U.S.

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190 Magnuson, "The Skies Grow Friendlier," *Time Magazine,* August 24, 1981.

191 Robert Pear, "Controllers Strike Shows Limits of Public Workers," *New York Times,* August 16, 1981.

192 Magnuson, "Turbulence in the Tower," *Time Magazine,* August 17, 1981.

that employed the same tactics. In the summer of 1985, 1,100 workers in Crossett, Arkansas went on strike against Georgia-Pacific, a paper company, and faced the hiring of replacements. This was a new tactic for the industry. Gary Cook of the United Paperworkers' International Union (UPIU) said, "Prior to the Crossett strike, companies would hire replacements, but when you went back to work, they were gone."[193] In the summer of 1986, 1,200 workers in Rumford, Maine went on strike against Boise Cascade, a paper mill, and also saw permanent replacement workers deployed by the company. As in Crossett, the small town was bitterly divided. Replacement workers took jobs from their striking friends and family members. A generation later, many families still do not speak to each other.[194] In the summer of 1994, 150 workers in Calera, Alabama went on strike against Blue Circle Cement Company where they saw permanent replacements come in. Jesse Burns, one of the few fired workers who was invited back after the union was crushed, remembers he was "applauding every time there was a big mess up out there. I mean I hated the place. I was ashamed to tell anybody that I worked for Blue Circle."[195] All three strikes illustrate that workers who went on strike faced a range of emotions only to see what they regarded as a traditional American right to collective bargaining snatched away. Air traffic controllers experienced similar feelings.

PATCO members in 1981 experienced the picket line in different ways. Denial was a completely normal reaction one saw in the early days of the strike: a feeling that Reagan would change his mind. For example, Dick Holzhauer, a controller in Oakland, California said, "[i]f we hang together, I know they can't run the system without us ... Where are they going to get 13,000 controllers?...They have to deal with us."[196] Anger was another emotion PATCO members expressed as they saw their many years of service to a stressful, but rewarding, occupation going up in flames because of the hard line taken by the president. Robert E. Poli, PATCO's president described Reagan's actions as "the most blatant form of union-busting I have ever seen." And as U.S. marshals took leaders of various union locals to jail and judges fined them a total of more than $1 million a day, fear was a common emotion on the picket line. Pat Hagen,

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193 Timothy J. Minchin, "Torn Apart: Permanent Replacements and the Crossett Strike of 1985," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 59, no.1 (Spring, 2000): 30-58.

194 Timothy J. Minchin, "Broken Spirits: Permanent Replacements and the Rumford Strike of 1986," *New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (March, 2001): 5-31.

195 Timothy J. Minchin, "Permanent Replacements and the Breakdown of the 'Social Accord' in Calera, Alabama, 1974-1999," *Labor History* 42, 4 (2001): 371-396.

196 Magnuson, "Turbulence in the Tower."

for example, on picket duty at Kennedy Airport said, "[s]ome of us may go to jail. I don't think I'd be normal if I wasn't frightened." Hagen added with pride, "but I'm not intimidated."[197]

Many in organized labor admitted the air traffic controllers called an illegal strike. But Jean R. Miller of San Diego made a compelling argument when she wrote to *Time Magazine* to say, "[i]s it not better to be afraid of unjust laws than to fear lawbreakers? We enthusiastically support Polish civil disobedience, yet we require of our civil servants totalitarian-like oaths that are illegal in the private sector."[198] But in the final days of October 1981, Reagan's punitive mission continued. His desire that the Federal Labor Relations Authority decertify PATCO was fulfilled. (It helped that the three members of the board were all Reagan appointees). It was the first time that a union representing federal employees was legally put out of existence.[199]

Smashing the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 was a huge success for President Reagan. It gave him an opportunity to display his toughness and resolve to the nation, as well as to the world. He taught organized labor a lesson and intimidated them from using one of their most potent weapons – the ability to strike. The president was able to act so forcefully thanks to the overwhelming public support for his handling of the strike. The country handed Reagan a virtual blank check to act against PATCO. They did not approve of a public worker's right to strike and also resented what they felt were extraordinary demands by the air traffic controllers. Organized labor, on the other hand, regarded Reagan's actions as an assault on a worker's right to collective bargaining and an abuse of power by the federal government. But what did Reagan actually accomplish in 1981 in his handling of the air traffic controllers' strike? Apparently he did not improve the nation's air traffic control system or the safety of the flying public. He did, however, manage to destroy 13,000 families financially and lay the groundwork for mass firings, the use of permanent replacement workers and, most tragically – establish the *fear* in American labor unions that calling a strike could mean losing their jobs.

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197 Magnuson, "Turbulence in the Tower."

198 Jean R. Miller, letter to the editors, "Air Controllers," *Time Magazine*, September 7, 1981, www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,924785,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

199 Walter Isaacson, "Flying the Emptier Skies," *Time Magazine*, November, 2, 1981, http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,950581,00.html (accessed April 25, 2009).