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## “The Rise and Demise of PATCO” Reconstructed

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# “The Rise and Demise of PATCO” Reconstructed

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] In his article “The Rise and Demise of PATCO” (Northrup 1984), Herbert Northrup presents a narrow and misleading explanation of the ill-fated air traffic controllers' strike of 1981. Northrup's thesis is that the goal of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike was to establish the right to bargain over wages within a private sector framework. He attributes the failure of the strike to the union's inept leadership and praises the Reagan administration for its firm response to the challenge presented by PATCO.

Although most of the facts he reports are accurate, Northrup omits crucial information regarding the management style of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the internal dynamics of PATCO. Based on this additional information, we will argue that PATCO'S primary goal was to address the work-related problems of the rank-and-file specifically by reducing the work week and improving the retirement system; that the primary cause of the strike was rank-and- file frustration with autocratic management; and that the Reagan administration joined forces with career FAA managers to destroy PATCO without giving sufficient consideration to less drastic alternatives.

## **Keywords**

union, labor movement, Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, PATCO, strike, Federal Aviation Administration, FAA

## **Disciplines**

Labor and Employment Law | Unions

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

Hurd, R. W. & Kriesky, J. K. (1986). “The rise and demise of PATCO” Reconstructed [Electronic version]. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 40(1), 115-122.  
<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/318/>

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## COMMUNICATIONS

### *"The Rise and Demise of PATCO" Reconstructed*

**I**N his article "The Rise and Demise of PATCO" (Northrup 1984), Herbert Northrup presents a narrow and misleading explanation of the ill-fated air traffic controllers' strike of 1981. Northrup's thesis is that the goal of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike was to establish the right to bargain over wages within a private sector framework. He attributes the failure of the strike to the union's inept leadership and praises the Reagan administration for its firm response to the challenge presented by PATCO.

Although most of the facts he reports are accurate, Northrup omits crucial information regarding the management style of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the internal dynamics of PATCO. Based on this additional information, we will argue that PATCO's primary goal was to address the work-related problems of the rank-and-file specifically by reducing the work week and improving the retirement system; that the primary cause of the strike was rank-and-file frustration with autocratic management; and that the Reagan administration joined forces with career FAA managers to destroy PATCO without giving sufficient consideration to less drastic alternatives.

#### The PATCO Bargaining Objectives

The weakest link in Northrup's analysis is his assertion that the basic objective of the 1981 PATCO strike was "wage determination on a private sector model" (Northrup 1984:171). This theme is subject to two possible interpretations. In its weaker version the goal of PATCO could have been to stretch federal labor relations law to the limit by bargaining over wages subject to Congressional approval. In its stronger version the goal of PATCO could have been to break away from the con-

straining civil service system by forcing the privatization of the FAA. PATCO could have attained the weaker form of private sector wage determination by ratifying the tentative contract signed on June 22, 1981. As Northrup interprets the situation, the union stubbornly refused to be satisfied with this precedent-setting agreement and instead staged "the 'definitive strike' aimed at achieving PATCO's basic aims of inducing Congress to establish an independent FAA, permitting wage bargaining, and legitimizing strikes" (Northrup 1984:174).

To support his thesis that this stronger version of private sector wage bargaining was the objective, Northrup refers to five PATCO sources (Northrup 1984:171n). Three of the five are not directly relevant to the 1981 negotiations because they predate Robert Poli's ascendancy to the presidency of the union. The remaining two sources are fatally flawed. The article "Maybe It's Time to Dismiss the FAA," which appeared in the *New York Times* on August 16, 1981, is credited to Robert Poli by Northrup when in fact it was written by Robert Poole, who has no association with PATCO. Poole is a long-time advocate of privatization of public services, and is clearly identified in an insert to the article as President of the Reason Foundation (Poole 1981). The July 13, 1981, UPI article referenced by Northrup in support of his position in fact contradicts him quite clearly. When asked to comment on a proposal to establish a private company to provide air traffic control services, PATCO officials disavowed any association with the plan. In fact, PATCO's eastern regional vice-president specifically disassociated the privatization proposal from the pending strike: "I'm sure we'll devote all our efforts to obtaining a new contract and realistically . . . we cannot rule out the possibility of a strike. So this [privatization] plan doesn't fit in at all under

the present circumstances" (UPI 1981:16).

In addition to the five PATCO sources, Northrup refers to a bill, HB 1576, introduced by Representative William Clay on PATCO's behalf in 1981. The Clay bill would have established a separate salary schedule for air traffic controllers, required the FAA to bargain over wages with the collective bargaining agent of the controllers, and provided for adjustment of the salary schedule to reflect any future collective bargaining agreement. The bill also included language that would have allowed the air traffic controllers to strike (U.S. House of Representatives 1981a).

Certainly HB 1576 would have enabled PATCO to negotiate under private sector rules, as argued by Northrup. What Northrup fails to report is that on July 30, 1981, Clay introduced a revised version of the legislation, HB 4332. *The revised bill deleted the provision for automatic adjustment of the salary schedule subject to collective bargaining, and omitted the right to strike* (U.S. House of Representatives 1981b). PATCO officials had agreed to these changes because they recognized that the bill stood no chance of serious consideration in its original form (Shostak and Skocik 1986, Chap. 5). The PATCO leaders most certainly would not have accepted such revisions four days before the strike if bargaining under private sector rules had been their primary objective.

Even when chastising the union for not accepting the weaker version of private sector bargaining, Northrup focuses on *wages*: "The willingness of the Reagan administration to bargain over wages . . . brought PATCO close to its goal" (Northrup 1984:183). This claim still misses the point. The publicly stated negotiating demands of PATCO indeed included a substantial wage increase. Besides inflicting considerable damage on the union's public image, the wage demands masked the key issues in the conflict. In five surveys conducted for the union by Drexel University sociology professor Arthur Shostak during 1979, 1980, and 1981, PATCO members consistently reported that their primary concerns were (1) wage gains, (2) a shorter workweek, and (3) an improved retirement plan

(Shostak and Skocik 1986, Chap. 5). Although the wage package offered by the Reagan administration was not as large as PATCO had hoped, both President Poli and Chief Negotiator Dennis Reardon are firm in their position that the wage improvement would have been acceptable had the contract also addressed the other two key issues (Poli 1985; Reardon 1985). In terms of narrow bargaining objectives, the priorities at the time of the strike were to shorten the workweek and improve the retirement system (Leyden 1982; Maher 1985; Poli 1985; Reardon 1985; Taylor 1985).

In fact, the July 1981 UPI article referenced by Northrup, although it did *not* support his thesis that PATCO's goal was to privatize its relations with the FAA, clearly reflected the true objectives of the union. The article reported that the contract faced likely rejection "by an overwhelming margin on the grounds that it does not address . . . [controllers'] main concerns—a shorter work week and better retirement benefits" (UPI 1981:16). By some accounts, the shorter workweek became the more important objective as the strike deadline approached. As *Business Week* summarized the situation, "Federal Aviation Association and union officials alike are now saying that the membership is homing in on the reduced work week issue" (*Business Week* 1981:26).

#### The Role of FAA Management

A second flaw in Northrup's analysis is his omission of any careful evaluation of management's role in the conflict. The reports of three groups of neutral outside experts, appointed by the Department of Transportation to assess the personnel difficulties of the FAA and to recommend solutions, contain a wealth of information on management's contribution to the recurrent hostilities. Northrup briefly mentions these studies, concluding that the reports "criticized the FAA's relations with its employees, although pointing out that PATCO leadership was heavily to blame" (Northrup 1984:168). As we read them, the reports document in detail the failings of

FAA management and make only secondary references to PATCO's role.

The Corson Committee was appointed after the PATCO job actions of 1968 and 1969. Its report, issued in January 1970, documents a series of problems with working conditions and recommends numerous changes in management policies. It includes stinging criticisms of management, such as the following:

[The] FAA cannot now command the full support of many members of the work force in its terminals and centers. Indeed, members of this committee have never previously observed a situation in which there is as much mutual resentment and antagonism between management and its employees. (Corson 1970:97)

It is true that the report also condemns PATCO's tactics, but it places substantial blame for the poor relations on management, decrying "the failure of FAA's management at all levels to truly understand the role of the employee organizations" (Corson 1970:108).

In 1973 the FAA commissioned a five-year study of the effect of the occupation on the health of employees under the direction of Boston University psychiatrist Robert Rose. The 1978 Rose Report concludes that air traffic controllers have an unusually high prevalence of hypertension and that job stress contributes to the psychiatric problems experienced by nearly half of the controllers. It also confirms the existence of a burnout phenomenon, concluding that "the period of maximum productivity as a controller is a limited one, perhaps 10, 15, but not more than 20 years" (Rose 1978:16). The report ties the problem of hypertension, job stress, and burnout directly to the management practices of the FAA. In its conclusion, the report notes "dissatisfaction among a large enough group to warrant a review of management policies and practices" (Rose 1978:628).

Following the PATCO strike, yet another task force was appointed. The Jones Report, issued in March 1982 and endorsed by all three members of the task force, provides direct evidence that the "para-military, heavy handed style" of FAA management

contributed to the PATCO strike (Jones, Bowers, and Fuller 1982:10; Witkin 1982). The report describes the "rigid and insensitive system of people management within the FAA" (Jones, Bowers, and Fuller 1982:1). It concludes that "the strike by air traffic controllers [is] consistent with what might have been expected—negative organizational conditions, treatment, and experiences, not peer pressure, caused most individuals to decide to strike" (Jones, Bowers, and Fuller 1982:68).

It is our impression that Northrup fails to recognize the provocative role played by management because of his reliance on interviews with FAA officials as the basis for much of his analysis. The explanation of the strike offered by top FAA managers is reviewed in an article by David Bowers, a member of the Jones Task Force and a research scientist at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. The management assessment parallels Northrup's closely. FAA managers believed that the key concerns of PATCO were much higher pay and benefits, and Northrup argues that the key objective was wage bargaining on a private sector model. FAA managers believed that PATCO had unrealistic expectations because of past FAA "indulgence" of the union's demands, and Northrup traces PATCO's behavior to the "equivocal" response of the federal government to past job actions. FAA managers believed that most controllers struck because of peer pressure, and Northrup identifies Poli's "adherents in the field" as instigators "whipping up" strike support (Bowers 1983:6; Northrup 1984:167, 177, 184).

Bowers emphatically rejects the FAA top management version of what transpired, noting that "the findings [of the Jones task force] stand in almost polar opposition to the views obtained in interviews and conversations with a wide array of key managers" (Bowers 1983:17). We also reject Northrup's version. Because he ignores the rigidity of FAA management, Northrup misses the catalyst role it played in the strike. The frustration of working controllers with their supervisors created a potentially explosive situation.

For its part, the FAA took a familiar management position. It blamed morale problems on PATCO and chose to ignore the evidence offered in the Corson and Rose reports. Rather than correcting management inadequacies, the FAA prepared for what Raymond Van Vuren, Director of Air Traffic, described in 1980 as an "inevitable" strike (BNA 1980:11). If the agency could weather the strike, PATCO would be destroyed and the problems would disappear.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the information in the three consulting reports and the Bowers article, we conclude that FAA management never accepted PATCO as a legitimate representative of the air traffic controllers, and the union predictably responded with an aggressive, confrontational approach. The controllers' support for PATCO and its strategies is best viewed as a reflection of management's failures.

#### Internal Dynamics of PATCO

A third weakness in Northrup's article is its lack of clarity regarding changes within PATCO that contributed to the events of 1981.<sup>2</sup> The unsavory work environment revealed in the task force reports enhanced PATCO's standing with air traffic controllers. Membership increased steadily in the years preceding the strike, peaking at nearly 94 percent of those eligible in the summer of 1981 (Spector and Beer 1982:13). The union actually began internal strike preparation in the fall of 1978. In response to rank-and-file discontent with

a three-year contract signed earlier that year, President John Leyden established a committee to begin planning for the next round of negotiations. Each of the seven regional vice-presidents selected a rank-and-file leader (the seven original "choir boys") to be a member of the "'81 Committee," with Executive Vice-President Robert Poli representing the national office. Leyden asked the committee to plan a legislative agenda, conduct a public relations campaign, and (as a last resort) prepare for a strike. To assure membership support in the event that a strike became necessary, a new policy was adopted requiring that 80 percent of all air traffic controllers (or roughly 90 percent of PATCO members) vote in favor of any such action (Leyden 1982).

After he ousted Leyden from the presidency in January 1980 as described by Northrup, Poli allowed the '81 Committee to focus its attention more single-mindedly on the mechanics of strike preparation (Maher 1985). Once a strike plan was developed it was explained at regional PATCO meetings and in an April 1980 memo from Poli (Poli 1980). Additional choir boys were selected by the '81 Committee to implement the plan locally. Eventually, there was one choir boy at each facility, or over 400 nationally. The choir boys were typically activists chosen for their ability to articulate positions and for their influence with the rank-and-file. Although a commitment to strike if necessary was required of each choir boy, PATCO officials insist that "non-violence was at all times primary and mandatory" (Maher 1984; Reardon 1985; Taylor 1985).

Each choir boy was instructed by the '81 Committee to organize seven local committees, with assignments ranging from picketing to family support. Most members of the union were assigned to a committee, ensuring the broadest possible participation in strike preparation (Poli 1980; Vacca 1982; Maher 1985). The weakness in this system was the exclusive focus of the committees on *strike* preparation. The tight internal cohesiveness became so powerful that it developed a momentum of its own, increasing the likelihood of a strike. It also increased the confidence of PATCO's leadership that the controller work force would

<sup>1</sup>Predictably, however, the problems did not go away. The Jones task force conducted a follow-up study in 1984, and concluded that the FAA had not heeded the commission's earlier advice to institute humane labor management techniques. Instead, the FAA has developed a human relations program "viewed [by the controllers] as inconsequential, as largely slogans and superficial window dressing" (Feaver 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Given his reliance on anonymous FAA sources for much of his information, it is not clear how Northrup developed his version of the internal dynamics of PATCO. We base most of this section and our prior discussion of the PATCO bargaining objectives on interviews with PATCO officials, some conducted in 1981 and 1982 as part of a prior research project and the remainder conducted in 1985 as we prepared this piece.

strike if necessary (Reardon 1985; Taylor 1985), contrary to Northrup's conclusion that the leaders "underestimated their ability to hold their members in line" (Northrup 1984:184).

As the contract expiration date approached, the influence of the '81 Committee and the choir boy system increased. Because of the unusually high degree of membership involvement, PATCO essentially became captive to the controllers' frustration with management. As Bowers has noted, the bargaining process was ill equipped to address the employee dissatisfaction with managerial behavior, and the demands were "projected onto 'harder' economic issues" (Bowers 1983:8). When bargaining with the FAA broke down, and the support from President Reagan that Poli had anticipated failed to materialize, the '81 Committee's strike plan became the only viable option. The high degree of internal organization assured PATCO's leaders of widespread member support for a strike. In fact, the momentum was so strong that aborting the strike would have been difficult. As former PATCO president Leyden cynically put it, "Disproportionate democracy led to a runaway ship" (Leyden 1982).

According to Northrup, the PATCO "script" called for Poli to accept the final offer of the Reagan administration in June, then have the executive board repudiate the offer and use it to whip up support for a strike. The supporting evidence provided is exceedingly thin, consisting of "call-in telephone recordings" and minutes from a local union meeting in Sacramento (Northrup 1984:175n). Northrup could provide us only with the meeting notes and a tape of a series of conversations between two controllers in Memphis and Indianapolis. The Sacramento meeting notes do not mention how PATCO intended to build strike support. They do, however, quote the choir boys conducting the meeting as stating, "If we get into the strike hall and come up short, . . . Mr. Poli will 'con' the media and will probably call an 11th hour settlement to try to 'save face.'" We can find no evidence that this was national policy. Efforts to contact the choir boys who presided at

this meeting to determine where they got this idea were unsuccessful. Dominic Torchia, the vice-president of the western region in which the meeting occurred, suggests, however, that an enthusiastic attempt to prepare the membership for a strike may have produced this speculative scenario (Torchia 1985).

On the tape, controllers from two locations discuss how they intend to build support in their workplaces for a future strike vote and which locals need to increase strike commitment. Although their conversation takes place in July 1981, it contains only vague allusions to using the June 22 contract to build strike support.

In short, based on the information that Northrup provided us, it appears that he has linked together two isolated local sources, one referring to what would happen if the June 21 strike vote fell short of the required 80 percent, the other referring to building support for the August 3 strike vote. But no logical connection exists. Interviews with national union officials, including Poli and several other negotiating committee members, suggest that the following very different series of events took place. After negotiations with the FAA broke down in late April, a June 22 strike deadline was announced. PATCO leaders believed that there was sufficient support for a strike. But when a strike vote conducted under the auspices of the '81 Committee on the day before the deadline fell slightly short of the necessary 80 percent, the PATCO negotiating team was backed into a corner. Even though the final offer of Secretary Lewis did not address the key issues of a reduced workweek and improved retirement system, it was accepted on June 22 by the negotiating team essentially because the team felt that it had no other option (Poli 1985; Maher 1985; Trick 1985; Reardon 1981; Reardon 1985; Taylor 1985).

Torchia, the western regional vice-president and a member of the executive board, recalls, however, that by the time the full executive board met in Chicago in early July, widespread rank-and-file opposition to the contract had surfaced. Any executive board member who had voted to

support the contract might well have been forced by the members to resign (Torchia 1985), which contributed to the board's recommendation that the contract be rejected by the members. Poli specifically denies the script described by Northrup, claiming that there was no contingency plan for the event the strike vote came up short ("We weren't that smart"; Poli 1985).

### The Reagan Administration Strategy

Northrup applauds the Reagan administration, which "unlike all its predecessors . . . had the will when tested to meet the challenge" presented by PATCO (Northrup 1984:183). We do not believe that the resolve is worthy of such unrestrained praise. Instead, we are convinced that the administration's actions actually contributed to the difficulty of reaching a negotiated settlement.

Although space limitations preclude a detailed review of the Reagan administration's negotiating tactics, even a brief summary reveals the underlying theme. Three particular actions exacerbated an already hostile collective bargaining environment. First, in February 1981 the Department of Transportation contracted with the law firm Morgan, Lewis, and Bockius to handle bargaining with PATCO (at an eventual cost of \$376,000) (Hershow 1982). This firm advocates a noncompromising approach to labor negotiations, and is known in labor circles as a "union buster" (AFL-CIO 1981, 1983). Second, in March 1981 Reagan appointed J. Lynn Helms to head the FAA. While president of Piper Aircraft, Helms had developed a firm anti-union reputation (Reinhold 1981:B9; Carley 1981:22).

Finally, the six-week hiatus between the tentative contract agreement and the strike was used by the FAA to secretly revise and strengthen a strike contingency plan originally prepared and published under the Carter administration. Had the strike occurred on June 23, the Carter plan (with minor changes published early in the Reagan administration) would have been used. The revised plan implemented on August 3 was considerably less restrictive than the original. It permitted the airlines,

in the event of a strike, to schedule more than twice as many flights as the Carter plan would have permitted. It also allowed the airlines to decide which flights should be canceled (FAA 1981; Meadows 1981; Richardson 1981). The revised plan was endorsed in advance of the strike by the major airlines and the Air Transport Association (Richardson 1980), but it was not divulged to PATCO officials (Young 1981). PATCO struck without knowing that the strike plan had been greatly changed. In an interview after the strike, PATCO's chief negotiator stated that prior knowledge of the revised plan would have given union negotiators pause and forced them to reevaluate their belief that a strike would virtually paralyze the system (Reardon 1981).

The ultimate step in Reagan's hard-line strategy was his decision to fire all striking air traffic controllers who did not return to their jobs within 48 hours of his back-to-work ultimatum. Given the hostility felt by the striking controllers, and the union's lack of knowledge of the revisions in the FAA's strike contingency plan, it is not surprising that most PATCO members ignored the back-to-work ultimatum. Although Northrup's praise of this "determination to break with the past and to enforce the law" (Northrup 1984:184) may seem reasonable to some observers, we side with the labor relations experts who argue that less severe alternatives should have been pursued. John Dunlop accurately summarized this position in the week following the walkout: "The administration has decided . . . to leave no avenue of escape for the union. You just don't do that . . . [Such an approach] is quite unusual, even going back to the turn of the century" (Taylor 1981:A1).

The Reagan administration's tactics were clearly legal and perfectly acceptable if the goal was to severely weaken or eliminate PATCO. Our disagreement with Northrup on this point is essentially a difference of opinion. As an alternative to firing the controllers, Dunlop suggested that some type of mediation could have been pursued beyond the pre-strike mediation by the FMCS. "What is absolutely without precedent, at least in modern times, is that [the



Reagan administration] has brought in no outside, dispassionate group to look at the problem. That ain't right" (Taylor 1981:A1).

Dunlop's position is similar to that taken by W. J. Usery, Jr., a former secretary of labor. Two weeks after the strike began, Usery publicly suggested that a panel of three former labor secretaries be assembled to mediate a settlement (Eaton and Cimonis 1981:1, 14; *Los Angeles Times* 1981). The Reagan administration, however, rejected all recommendations to seek mediation and remained firm in its firing decision. We believe that the collective bargaining environment in the United States was harmed by this hard-line attitude, which encouraged anti-union managers in the public and private sectors to follow the president's example.

### Conclusion

A complex set of circumstances contributed to PATCO's ultimate decision to strike. Despite advice from independent task forces to revise management practices, the FAA persisted in its autocratic treatment of controllers. In response, PATCO became increasingly militant, and by 1981 the internal activities of the union were narrowly focused on strike preparation. The hard line taken by the Reagan administration legitimized the stubbornness of FAA management and presented the challenge PATCO militants had been anticipating. With

this combination of factors, the strike was virtually inevitable.

A different conclusion could have been reached. Had FAA management been more responsive to the concerns of its employees, the situation would not have deteriorated as it did and PATCO would not have been able to adopt so militant a posture. The strike could also have been averted had the Reagan administration addressed the concerns of the controllers by seriously negotiating over the issues of retirement and hours of work. On the other hand, PATCO might have emerged from the negotiations victorious, or at least survived the strike, with a better strategy. Although the union's internal organizing efforts were extensive and effective, its external relations were largely ignored: coordination with other unions was not pursued, public relations were poor, and political activities were misguided.

Northrup's analysis closely resembles the myopic assessment of the strike offered by career FAA managers. As such, it misses the flaws in management and the internal dynamics of PATCO. We believe that the information we have presented fills in the gaps in his analysis and completes the picture of this complex, precedent-setting confrontation.

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