

Labor History: The Astronaut Strike

By Ed Leavy

Walking a picket line is not an option when orbiting thousands of miles above the earth, but that did not prevent the three crew on Skylab 4 from going on strike. On December 28, 1973, the three astronauts – Jerry Carr, Ed Gibson, and William Pogue – switched off their radio connection to NASA ground control in Houston and spent their time, “studying the sun, the earth below, and ourselves,” wrote Pogue. Meanwhile, the ground staff grumbled, unable to do anything.

As anyone who has ever read *The Right Stuff* knows, the tension between NASA’s engineers staff in Houston and the astronauts has existed from the beginning of the space program. The astronauts saw themselves as the ones taking all the risks; nine American astronauts and six Soviet cosmonauts had died during the ten years before the Skylab 4 launch. Engineers and the ground crew resented the cult of celebrity astronauts had and viewed them as little more than drones; they would occasionally point out that the first flights were done with monkeys, and that worked out fine. By the time of Skylab 4, public interest in the space program had begun to wane, and with the loss of fame for the astronauts came a loss of status within the program. The schedule created for the Skylab astronauts was grueling. The 84-day orbit was the longest anyone had endured. Carr, Gibson, and Pogue were given 16-hour schedules for the entire journey; there was no personal time built into the plan.

The schedule made tension inevitable, and it began immediately. Pogue was sick when the expedition started, but because he correctly saw it as a short-term bug the crew didn’t report it to Houston. When the ground crew heard the astronauts discussing it through the monitors, the scolded the crew for keeping secrets. The schedule proved to be too ambitious, and the astronauts fell behind. NASA responded by insisting they work through meals and cut back on sleep. It had already been decided that this would be the final Skylab flight; previous Skylab orbits had run into problems and been cut short, so NASA wanted every test that had been planned for the Skylab series to be completed on this flight. Previous Skylab commanders told NASA that the expectations for the astronauts were too severe, but NASA kept up the demands.

The relationship between the astronauts and NASA became untenable. NASA dismissed the astronauts as chronic complainers, while the astronauts began to seethe at every request. Exchanges became volatile. On Christmas Day, Mission Commander Carr sent a message to Houston, “We need more time to rest. We need a schedule that is not so packed. We don’t want to exercise after a meal. We need to get things under control.” Three days later, NASA finally responded – the mission would continue as scheduled. The astronauts grew more cohesive as the mission progressed. Pogue wrote, “We got along together just fine. We were bound by a common enemy: Mission Control.”

Finally, the astronauts had enough. Carr told Houston, “We would never be expected to work 84 straight 16-hour days on earth. Why should we in space?” He then turned off the radio for 24 hours. There was nothing NASA could do. One day later, he turned the radio back on. Suddenly, the attitude from NASA was much different. They made sure the astronauts had sufficient rest, they made requests rather than demands, and

overall the working conditions improved dramatically. The second half of the trip – the strike was almost exactly the half way point – went without incident. NASA reached a realization that, according to experts, they have never forgotten – that because the astronauts are in space and the ground crew isn't, they ultimately have the control.

Though the incident is now forgotten, at the time it was viewed as part of an overall change in the labor movement. Labor was seen to be moving from its blue-collar roots to a more professional status, and the fact that astronauts were going on strike seemed to fit right into that narrative. Of course, that change never happened, or at least hasn't happened yet. Blue collar membership is indeed decreasing, but the spread of unions in the professional class never materialized. Today, the astronaut strike is a forgotten anecdote, not a tipping point in the labor movement.

I first learned of this strike from William Pogue's obituary March 10, 2014. That obituary and several other internet articles were used in my research.