

# **Labor History: The Air Traffic Controller's Strike**

*By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative*

The history of labor is filled with examples of union leadership intelligently developing a strategy and then the membership courageously following that strategy to win benefits that improve their lives. These moments are instructive and inspiring for anyone who cares about the lives of working people today. There are also examples of union leadership misreading their abilities to gain significant change, failing to build the alliances necessary to win support, and seducing the membership into disaster. These cases are also instructive as warning tales of the need for responsible leadership. No issue better illustrates the dangers of mismanaging labor battles than the air traffic controller strike of 1981.

The Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization (PATCO) was founded in 1968. From the start, the primary concern of the union was the demands the job put on its members, both physically and psychologically. The controllers felt that the unique stresses of the job were being downplayed by management, a belief that was reinforced when Federal Aviation Authority Chairman Langhorne Bond stated that the job of air traffic controller was no more stressful than New York bus driver. Independent reports indicated that the demands of the job did indeed take a toll on the controllers, but the reports went largely ignored by management.

The members' sense that no one in management really understood their jobs made PATCO an unusually aggressive union. As Federal employees, PATCO did not have the legal right to strike, but used sick outs and work slowdowns to make their points. A twenty-day sick out caused the government to get an injunction from using similar actions. The PATCO executive board became frustrated, and replaced the moderate president for the past decade, John Leyden, with the far more radical Robert Poli. Poli immediately cleared out the staff and legal team and replaced them with people loyal to him. He then began discussing a strike.

Poli believed he was in good position with the Federal government because PATCO was the only union that had supported Ronald Reagan during the 1980 election. He met with Secretary of Transportation Andrew Lewis to discuss a new contract. Lewis offered a raise of \$4000 a year, technical workplace improvements, night shift raises, and time and a half after 36 hours. Given that Reagan had run on a promise to reduce government spending, the offer seemed remarkable. PATCO, which had adopted a radical position, was unimpressed. The agreement was rejected 13,495-616.

The air traffic controllers went on strike, demanding a reduction in the work week from 40 hours to 32 hours per week and a \$10,000 raise per employee. To the surprise of no one except the union leadership, public opinion was vehemently against the controllers; in a difficult economy, no one thought a 20% cut in working hours and a \$10,000 raise was a reasonable demand. Even the usually liberal New York Times supported the President's refusal to deal with the strikers, stating "President Reagan's tough threat to fire the workers is appropriate." The union never adequately convinced the public that its primary concern was public safety. PATCO also was unable to build alliances with other related unions; the pilots, the machinists, and all of the other airline unions crossed the picket line. Unions in general were put in a difficult spot; they feared the precedent breaking the union could create, they disliked and distrusted Reagan, but they didn't dare support contract demands that the public at large found outrageous. Additionally, the implied tactic of using innocent air travelers' lives as a strategy in a game of chicken was impossible to support.

Strikes by Federal employees were illegal, and Reagan acted. He fired 11,000 air traffic controllers and had the union decertified. He then rather maliciously made sure that all fired

employees were denied unemployment benefits and any federal benefit programs. While Reagan's actions were in many ways unfair and simplistic, he had won the PR battle; more accurately, PATCO had ceded it to him. They assumed that everyone saw the issues the way they did, and did not build the relationships necessary to have their issues addressed. They chose not to move in measured, incremental steps, but rather demanded everything at once. In doing so, PATCO leadership did harm to unions that still reverberates today. More importantly, they left 11,000 of their members unable to support themselves or their families.

*Most of the information for this article is from There is Power in a Union by Philip Dray*