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What Resulted When Reagan Fired the Striking Air Traffic Controllers in 1981?

On August 5th, 1981, two days after the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (or PATCO) officially began their strike, President Reagan fired all currently striking members of the union. As a result, upwards of 11,000 air traffic controllers were laid off. The air traffic controllers had not been demanding anything exceedingly extravagant or out of the ordinary; their motives were better working conditions, higher pay and a shorter workweek. Despite the “no-strike” oath that they had taken when they were hired, the union members justified their actions by citing the brutality of their working conditions. One striker claimed that he had lost substantial hearing in one ear due to the “cheap” headset that he had to use.¹ He also complained that he needed psychotherapy to relieve himself of the anxiety caused by his job (presumably because of the stress from working long hours).² The PATCO union members assumed that because air traffic controllers are hard to replace, Reagan would be willing to negotiate with them. They also assumed that their absence would have such an enormous effect on national air transportation that it would not be difficult to get their demands met.

Unfortunately they seriously misjudged both of their predictions. First, President Reagan was not willing to negotiate with PATCO members; he came down hard on the strikers not only by firing them, but also by declaring that their strike was illegitimate and illegal. While the strikers claimed that Reagan was overly aggressive and at times “bloodthirsty,” Reagan himself felt his actions were completely justified.³ In a news conference on August 13th, Reagan told reporters that a Presidential pardon of the strikers was out of the question because they were in direct violation of the “no-strike” clause in their contracts; it was for this reason that Reagan refused to negotiate with the strikers, and even claimed that “there [was] no strike” at all because of its illegality.⁴

Second, the air traffic controllers overestimated their power to halt national air travel and transportation. While it is true that many flights were cancelled due to the

strike, many more flights were unaffected. Many airports including Newark Airport in New Jersey had 80% of their flights arriving and departing on time, thanks to Reagan's actions (which included pulling together a cast of substitute air traffic controllers from other airports and training centers to keep national air travel from complete paralysis).⁵ Thus, the flood that the strikers aimed to cause turned out to be "just a ripple" in the history of national air travel.⁶

Notes

¹ Leslie Bennetts, "An Uneasy Time for Strikers," *New York Times* (13 August 1981): A1. Available from: ProQuest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menloschool.org>> (accessed 26 March 2006).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ronald Reagan, "News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters" (news conference, Santa Barbara, CA, 13 August 1981). Quoted in: "Transcript of President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters," *New York Times* (14 August 1981): A10. Available from: ProQuest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menloschool.org>> (accessed 27 March 2006).

⁵ Anthony DePalma, "Air Strike: Little Impact In the State," *New York Times* (16 August 1981): NJ1. Available from: ProQuest, New York Times Historical Collection, Menlo School Lib. <<http://library.menloschool.org>> (accessed 27 March 2006).

⁶ Ibid.