The 1981 PATCO Strike:
Fierce Debate, Failed Diplomacy, and Broken Unions

Liah Y. Chung
Senior Division
Paper
Paper: 2,497 words
Process Paper: 498 words
Process Paper:

Prior to writing my paper, I did not know anything about the PATCO labor dispute. I knew of it but nothing more until August 3, 2021—the fortieth anniversary of the strike—when I heard a story about it on NPR. A former controller was talking about how he regretted striking; the strike had ruined his life, the lives of his co-workers, and the lives of other workers ever since. He said that considering the damage it caused to the rest of organized labor, it really was not worth it. I was immediately struck by his tragic story and started researching more. I learned about the decades of building antagonism between controllers and supervisors, the months-long failed negotiations between the FAA and controllers, and the catalytic effect it had on labor’s decline.

I started my research by looking through websites and exploring journal analyses of the strike. I then read the book *The Air Controllers’ Controversy* which helped me understand controllers’ perspective and Reagan’s hostility. I read *Collision Course* which was immensely helpful in analyzing primary sources that I did not have access to as well as deciphering historical nuances. The New York Times Archive was also especially valuable in providing information on general public opinion of the strike during 1981. Using these resources, I wrote an outline for my paper and started writing.

The 1981 PATCO strike has had extraordinary impacts on today’s society but it’s a forgotten, little known part of history that should be remembered and understood—regardless of which side of the picket line is deemed right. Whenever I do a project on a niche part of history, I am surprised I never knew about it before; it seems unbelievable that I used to not care about unions or Reagan. I think learning about history, spending months on an academic, extracurricular project really connects us to the topic’s current relevance. I’ll hear about some story on the news about a union, teacher’s pay, or right to work contention and automatically think about PATCO’s impact on organized labor.

Studies show a direct correlation between decreased union membership and increased economic inequality. Striking is a singularly persuasive instrument that empowers workers. There is no leverage like the ability to take away vital services, but unions have become so afraid of being fired and replaced that they do not strike. Today’s workers are in a unique position. With a pro-union president and a growing movement to ensure that the economy is for more than just businessmen on Wall Street, unions have a chance to make the real change for the first time in many, many years. The pandemic has both spotlighted and accelerated issues of worker exploitation. I think that although the PATCO strike caused irreversible damage to the labor movement, unions finally have a chance to come back, make change, and launch a new era of economic equality that prioritizes the people over corporate greed. PATCO’s past is prologue, and there’s still a chance for labor to rebound.
“Our past is prologue.”
- Jack Maher, PATCO co-founder, letter to 1981 strikers

Introduction

In 1962, President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988, permitting the first public-sector unions to organize and negotiate with federal agencies. However, these unions were banned from bargaining over what mattered most to them: wages, hours, and retirement. Furthermore, the order forbade the use of labor’s most powerful weapon—the strike.

The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) was a federal labor union primarily consisting of white, working-class veterans. Throughout its 13 year existence, PATCO made remarkable progress for controllers, but still felt marginalized by their supervising agency, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). By 1981, after months of fruitless negotiations and decades of animosity between controllers and the FAA, the union stood up one final time; PATCO ceased settlement attempts, went on a doomed strike, and all strikers were immediately fired, resulting in the union's collapse.

As the first offensive in the corporate war against America’s middle class, the PATCO strike was a watershed moment in U.S. labor history. The unprecedented hostility against PATCO pushed employers toward aggressive strikebreaking and caused a generational decrease

---

3 McCartin, *Collision Course*, 287.
in unions’ willingness to strike. The diplomatic failures during controllers’ fiercely-debated contract negotiations still echo today, suppressing current unions, transforming modern perceptions of collective bargaining, and demonstrating the importance of compromise in conflict.

**PATCO’s Origins**

Few people in 1981 appreciated those who practically lived in radar rooms, directed their planes, and ensured their survival, a fact controllers demanded to change.

The U.S. was heavily reliant on their air system. Nearly three million passengers flew daily, generating millions of dollars for the economy.\(^5\) Deregulation caused airlines to conserve fuel through faster departures. Subsequently, the skies became saturated, the difficulty of controllers’ jobs grew, and they became increasingly discontent with their working conditions.\(^6\)

Controllers had extremely stressful jobs.\(^7\) They simultaneously juggled dozens of planes and hundreds of lives and made split-second decisions while adhering to strict regulations. This intense responsibility often resulted in severe stress-induced medical disabilities including heart

disorders and “burn-out” before controllers were eligible for retirement benefits.8 However, controllers still loved their jobs. Most found the risk “better than any video game.” They were arrogant and egotistical, but “that’s the way you had to be,” because controllers without nerve killed people.9 Yet, despite the major roles they played in maintaining the country, these highly-skilled workers felt unheard.

The poor relationship between controllers and the FAA magnified frustration. Controllers worked long weeks and lacked protections. When archaic equipment and system defaults caused accidents, controllers were scapegoated.10 One study showed controllers felt an “intense and chronic feeling of alienation” from heavy-handed, paramilitary managers who dismissed their concerns (Appendix A).11

Collective anger at these unique pressures formed powerful bonds amid controllers, eventually leading them to organize into an official union, PATCO. In the 13 years between its inception and the strike, PATCO conducted several sickouts and slowdowns—technically illegal job actions but not the ultimate strike—and won extraordinary benefits such as dues checkoffs, retirement programs, and higher pay grades.

FAA-controller relationships only further deteriorated with these job actions; controllers still felt neglected while the FAA resented PATCO for the criticism they received. Intensifying this was an influx of younger, more aggressive controllers entering the FAA after serving in Vietnam. The union’s militants became a majority, and PATCO’s progress was forgotten. By 1978, controllers wanted a real strike. This, combined with the increasingly clear fact that only greater leverage could win anything significant during the 1981 contract negotiations, forced action.

PATCO started strike preparations. Leaders concluded 80% of all controllers needed to strike to paralyze the air system. They had a challenging job; 60% of members would not

---

16 McCartin, Collision Course, 224.
strike for even “their most cherished demands,” and many were reluctant to break their federal employees’ oath renouncing strikes. To reach 80%, activists spent the next three years radicalizing controllers, often proclaiming the only illegal strikes were unsuccessful and PATCO was “not a union,” but a religion.\textsuperscript{17} Soon, the movement developed its own uncontrollable momentum.

By 1980, 69% of controllers favored striking.\textsuperscript{18} However, all these preparations completely disregarded federal strikes’ illegality and that the government would not tolerate such obvious violations of the law.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Labor in 1980s America}

The strike occurred at perhaps the most vulnerable moment for American workers since the Great Depression. 1981 began a tumultuous decade characterized by economic downturn and rising anti-labor sentiment.\textsuperscript{20} With the emergence of a global economy, companies could produce inexpensive goods overseas without concerns of unions. This caused soaring

\textsuperscript{17} McCartin, \textit{Collision Course}, 225.
\textsuperscript{20} Morgan, "Terminal Flight," 165.
unemployment and amplified employers’ ability to exploit workers. Consequently, any job openings, regardless of their origins, were highly coveted.\textsuperscript{21}

Silent conservatives had been galvanized by progressive policies. Free market principles and libertarianism were growing. The ongoing Cold War made capitalism an important part of the American identity and encouraged anti-socialist domestic policies that hurt unions.\textsuperscript{22} As a popular presidential candidate, Republican Ronald Reagan appealed to these sentiments.

Most unions opposed Reagan in the 1980 presidential elections, viewing him bitterly anti-labor.\textsuperscript{23} However, PATCO initially had several reasons to support him. Reagan was a former Hollywood union president where he led several strikes.\textsuperscript{24} He championed striking Polish workers’ cause and unions’ right to collective bargaining.\textsuperscript{25} Additionally, seeking PATCO’s endorsement, Reagan wrote to the union that his administration “would bring about a spirit of cooperation” with controllers. He pledged to “take whatever steps necessary” to improve

working conditions. With this seemingly unbreakable written vow, boosted by frustration with the incumbent administration’s FAA, PATCO divided the labor movement and endorsed Reagan, a move they would soon regret.

**Failed Diplomacy**

Reagan won the election. He appointed transportation secretary Drew Lewis, a sympathetic politician, to head PATCO’s contract negotiations while union president Robert Poli led PATCO. The talks were critical to all organized labor, setting the tone for future negotiations under Reagan.

Talks opened February 12, 1981. PATCO expected large gains; they had publicized strike plans and were optimistic from Reagan’s letter. Poli began with high demands like $10,000 salary raises and a 32-hour workweek to match international counterparts. Citing EO 10988’s nonnegotiable stipulations, government negotiators refused, but PATCO only responded, “We’ll work it out on the picket lines.” One estimate claimed PATCO’s originally proposed package


cost $770 million.\textsuperscript{30} However, others predicted a strike would cost the economy $150 million daily, so the government was willing to compromise.\textsuperscript{31}

After months of fruitless debate where federal negotiators avoided discussion of key demands, PATCO decided to act, believing progress could only be made if the government realized their strike threat was serious. At PATCO’s national convention on May 23, Poli announced controllers would strike on June 22 if an acceptable contract was not presented by then, prompting thunderous applause.\textsuperscript{32}

Once PATCO declared a strike deadline, Lewis convinced Reagan to offer controllers a $40 million contract with extremely generous, precedent-setting concessions including 11.3% salary increases—over double other federal employees’ wages.\textsuperscript{33} Nevertheless, Poli refused; rather than closing negotiations, it only reinforced PATCO’s belief that their strike threat was working and pushing talks further would get them more.

On June 21, the two sides reconvened, and Lewis tried one last time. Negotiations continued through midnight though Poli clearly would not settle. Meanwhile, controllers nationwide gathered at local PATCO headquarters for the headcount. Yet, despite estimates anticipating the necessary 80%, they ended with only 75%; there could be no strike. Poli was forced to compromise. However, Lewis restrained federal negotiators from retracting previously

offered items, stressing diplomacy over confrontation. With only half of 96 points settled, negotiations eventually finished at 10:30am.\textsuperscript{34}

As Poli left the meeting and was bombarded by reporters, he called the new contract “fair” and “equitable,” expecting no trouble with member ratification.\textsuperscript{35} Poli was wrong. Controllers were angry and unsatisfied. They saw it as a “Band-Aid for cancer” and “not even close to what [was] asked for,” as it was only one-fifth of their original demands.\textsuperscript{36} In reality, no contract—no matter how favorable—could ever pacify controllers’ accumulated fury. Poli altered his position after learning the majority view, signifying the militant union’s growing intractability.\textsuperscript{37}

On July 30, 1981, Poli announced 95\% of members voted contract rejection and made August 3 the new strike deadline, giving the government just three days to negotiate a settlement.\textsuperscript{38} Frustrated, Lewis reminded PATCO of federal strikes’ illegality and claimed the

deadline showed a “disdain for the bargaining process” and “the economy we are all trying so hard to repair.”

Negotiations reopened August 2, just hours away from the deadline. Lewis offered the same $40 million package, but this time allowed controllers to decide how the money would be applied. Poli refused, calling this “tokenism.” Talks soon deadlocked.

Controllers again gathered for the headcount, yet PATCO failed to reach 80%. Regardless, everyone knew negotiations were a hollow formality. With or without meeting the goal, controllers would strike; PATCO had gone too far to turn back. At 2:30am, Poli claimed their differences “appeared unresolvable” and left without even knowing the headcount. Finally, controllers were on strike.

**Strike!**

On August 3, 1981, PATCO’s strike was felt worldwide. Over 12,000 controllers walked out, immediately canceling 7,000 flights and disrupting intercontinental travel (Appendix B). Never had the U.S. faced such a severe threat to air travel—nor would a strike ever cause such irreparable damage to the labor movement.

---


Considering Reagan’s letter and generous contract offer, controllers expected a sympathetic reaction. However with the world watching, Reagan could not yield to the defiant controllers who had openly violated the law without appearing weak and unfit. Thus, Reagan himself delivered an uncompromising ultimatum: controllers who did not report for work within 48 hours would be fired. He also refused to negotiate with any illegally striking union, prioritizing principle over pragmatism.\(^{42}\) Although this timeline allowed hesitant controllers to return to work, it expired before strikers could feel lost paychecks and understand Reagan’s resolve.\(^{43}\)

Only 500 controllers returned by August 5, making the remaining 11,345 strikers jobless.\(^{44}\) Those who crossed picket lines were threatened for betraying cherished solidarity (Appendix C).\(^{45}\)

Although leaders had told controllers to prepare for a months-long strike, most thought it would last only two weeks and were not truly ready.\(^{46}\) Compounding matters was the FAA’s thorough preparations started in January 1980.\(^{47}\) The FAA’s plans relied on several things: limiting airborne aircrafts and exaggerating their separation; using retrained supervising, military, and retired controllers; and cooperating with airlines that canceled flights to relieve


\(^{43}\) McCartin, *Collision Course*, 284, 294, 299.

\(^{44}\) Houlihan, "The Legacy," Jacobin; McCartin, *Collision Course*, 276.


controllers as well as help airlines adjust to deregulation.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, the FAA swiftly moved to file for strike leaders’ arrests and fined the union $28.8 million in airline damages, bankrupting PATCO.\textsuperscript{49}

At the strike’s outset, only 50% of flights were cleared, but that number rose to 70% by August 13—an impressive percentage given there was only 1/5 of controllers employed at pre-strike levels.\textsuperscript{50} Nonetheless, the strike was not without consequences for the FAA. Thousands of flights were canceled or delayed. Airports were in calamity. Passengers were irate. With the concurrent economic regression, most saw the strike as “ridiculous,” considered controllers greedy, and endorsed their firings.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{50} Northrup, "The Rise," 177.

Controllers who stayed became an exhausted “skeleton crew.” They worked 60-hour weeks and sometimes slept in facilities. Secretly, controllers said flying was “dangerous… unreliable,” contradicting the government’s unfailing claims of confidence in air travel. Even decades after the strike, the FAA concealed safety problems. Radar rooms were understaffed, and less than 60% of those employed were fully qualified.

In a time of major recession, these stable government jobs were in high demand. Within two weeks of the strike, the FAA received over 20,000 applications for controller positions. These controllers were pushed through accelerated training and brought into the same facilities strikers had spent decades working. Meanwhile, strikers received letters notifying them they were not—and never could be—federal employees again. Although controllers remained hopeful in the strike’s first weeks, it soon became apparent they would never be rehired. As far

53 McCartin, Collision Course, 301.
54 1981 PATCO.
as Reagan was concerned, the strike was over by August 13. This marked an end for controllers; publicly, PATCO was finished, and new controllers were rebuilding the system.

PATCO’s demise was official on October 22, 1981, when they were decertified.

Strikers were devastated. Not only had they lost a loved, well-paying job and a union they had worshiped, but the president they had endorsed had banned them from the only profession that used their nontransferable skills. Lucky ones got blue-collar jobs, but some found no work. Tragically, the post-strike stress caused many strikers to develop drinking disorders, suffer divorces, and die by suicide.

Not only did Reagan refuse to rehire strikers, but his administration also secretly falsified documents to fire controllers legitimately excused from work and blacklisted them from both private-sector and foreign jobs. Some were refused food stamps and unemployment benefits.

---

58 Morgan, "Terminal Flight," 172
61 Durnin, "The Professional," 58.
Reagan wanted to maintain the strong international image created by his resolve against PATCO and in doing so, ruined thousands of lives.

**Conclusion**

PATCO’s ghost haunts labor. When air systems still functioned despite 70% of controllers on strike, people called for hiring freezes on all unionized federal fields, believing them overstaffed and unaware of the dangerous realities of flying.\(^{63}\)

The strike propelled Reagan’s presidency. In 1981, Reagan announced that only work stoppages involving at least 1,000 workers would be recorded, effectively erasing strikes from the collective consciousness and making them statistically and historically invisible.\(^{64}\) Moreover, his hostility towards PATCO sent an international message, particularly to the Soviets, that he was unwavering.\(^{65}\) His breaking of PATCO marked the dawn of a conservative era that would prove more anti-labor than ever before.

Reagan’s strike-breaking has been used to justify current implementations of anti-labor policies. For example, Governor Scott Walker invoked the PATCO strike to strip private-sector workers in Wisconsin of their bargaining rights (Appendix D).\(^{66}\) Since the strike, many companies—including Greyhound Lines, Verizon, and Detroit News—have adopted Reagan’s

---

64 McCartin, *Collision Course*, 351.
“PATCO style of negotiating” where they offer nothing to unions, force them to strike, and then replace them with complacent workers. Employers perceive Reagan as unyielding in contract negotiations. In reality, the generous contract originally offered would have boosted organized labor in the coming decades. After its rejection and impact on Reagan’s presidency, these critical details have been overlooked.

Labor now sees strikes as futile, something known as “PATCO syndrome.” The firings demonstrated even the most specialized workers are replaceable. Literature referencing PATCO was published by both intimidated union leaders and anti-union corporations to deter strike sentiments. Modern unions are so afraid of echoing PATCO’s fall they often settle for less. Today, rising economic inequality, declining union membership, expanding labor exploitation, and workers’ lack of strike experience prompt worries that organized labor can never again make necessary changes through job actions.

The 1981 strike was the fragmenting explosion of decades of debate over management failures, unfair working conditions, and resentment over federal union’s inability to bargain over what really mattered. PATCO’s unwillingness to accept a massive, unparalleled contract combined with Reagan’s ensuing hostility catalyzed labor’s decline. Although the strike eventually faded from the headlines, PATCO’s legacy still endures today, scarred in the lives of those who striked in 1981 and ingrained into the minds of those who fight for their rights today.

---

69 McCartin, Collision Course, 347.
Appendix A

1980 PATCO Cartoon

This cartoon was published in a PATCO newsletter and depicts controllers’ discontent over their high-stress environments, the archaic and broken equipment they were forced to use, and the FAA’s unfair management.

This image portrays the front page of the New York Times on August 4, 1981. It discusses the immediate action following the strike, the failed negotiations between PATCO and the FAA, and the government’s refusal to bargain with a striking union. The left column also includes information about Poland’s Solidarity movement, helping to contrast Reagan’s handling of PATCO with his support of organized labor abroad.

Appendix C

Air-traffic controllers on strike in Ronkonkoma, New York, in August, 1981

This photograph depicts a spirited, defiant PATCO picket line outside a New York facility before strikers realized their cause was hopeless.


Appendix D

Gov WalkerReagan wannabe

This 2011 political cartoon comments on Governor Walker’s comparison of himself to Reagan when he invoked the breaking of PATCO to justify a bill that stripped Wisconsin workers of their collective bargaining rights.


Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

I used this 1981 television broadcast of the strike to understand the general public opinion of the strike in 1981 as well as learn how complex air traffic control is. The video provided interesting clips of picket lines, control towers, and American homes, as families watched the strike unfold.

This website contains a graph showing how many passengers were carried in the years between 1970 and 2020. It helped me understand the exponentially growing number of passengers and thus how pressure on controllers increased dramatically. This is a primary source because I only used the statistics to see how many people flew in 1981, not any analysis of these numbers.

This court case helped me understand the controversy over controllers' strike funds and the early preparations PATCO made. It was interesting to learn how all of PATCO’s plans were technically illegal but were unpunished until Reagan’s firing and how that encouraged strikers not to back down.

This report on unemployment and inflation in 1981 was essential to my understanding of how vulnerable American workers were during the PATCO strike. It provided important historical context that helped me understand one of the reasons why PATCO failed as well as why Reagan’s conservative policies were so popular.

This article describes decreased airline service even five years after the strike. It argues for the government to not foolishly prioritize politics over people's lives. The source helped me understand Reagan's hostility and the benefits and consequences of rehiring strikers.

This document includes a series of papers on the recovery of the FAA’s air traffic control force. It provides important details and statistics on controller shortages, training, and demographics. It helped me understand why controllers were so certain they would be successful, their sudden and tragic firings, and how unsafe it was to fly even almost two decades after the strike.

This is a weblog that McCartin, the author of Collision Course, posted on his website to ask if anyone knew how to contact Poli. At the bottom, there are posts by former controllers who were fired during the strike. In their posts, they described their relationship with and feelings toward Poli; some were angry at him for leading a doomed strike while others were sympathetic, helping me understand Poli from a more personal perspective and how controllers feel about the strike now.

This 1981 article describes the replacement of strikers with thousands of applications from new recruits. It describes how, as far as the government was concerned, the walkout was illegal, controllers would not be getting their jobs back, and the strike was over within two weeks. The source helped me understand how the new employees, not the rehired strikers, would carry on the system, marking a tragic end for PATCO.

This 1981 news report on the strike describes picket lines and violence between FAA and strikers. It helped me understand how outspoken, passionate, but also volatile many controllers felt regarding the strike and how horrible it was for them when they realized they had failed.

This 1981 news report on the PATCO strike describes the FAA's plans to rebuild the air traffic controller force by pushing applicants through accelerated training programs. It related the strike to the economic recession and helped me understand the significance of the strike happening during an economic recession. It also explained why flying was not as safe specifically because applicants spent less time training to cover up the weaknesses in Reagan’s ultimatum.

This 1981 article, written by congressman John Conyers, describes the double standard between private and federal workers. He argues for federal unions' right to strike and condemns Reagan's hostile firing of thousands of controllers. It helped me understand the relationship between private and public workers and the controversy over federal employees’ oaths.


Elsner. Cartoon. *PATCO Presidential Update*, October 3, 1980, 19. Accessed January 8, 2022. This primary source is a 1980 PATCO cartoon sent to members. It depicts a collapsed controller being wheeled out by a medic while an angry FAA manager blames the controller as inadequate, despite the archaic equipment and burn-out environment being the true cause of the accident. It helped me understand how stressed controllers are, their unfair working conditions, and why there was so much discontent and debate over their jobs.

Exec. Order No. 10988, 3 C.F.R. 1211 (1962). Accessed December 28, 2021. https://www.flra.gov/system/files/webfm/FLRA%20Agency-wide/50th%20Anniversary%20EO%2010988/Executive%20Order%2010988.pdf. Reading EO 10988 revealed to me the huge advances JFK made for public sector unions as well as the restrictions and flaws of it. I was able to better understand how extraordinary PATCO’s job actions between 1969 and 1981 were but also why Reagan was so firm and technically vindicated in his statements that strikers who were violating the law could not be rehired.

"The Expanding Responsibility of the Government Air Traffic Controller." *Fordham Law Review* 36, no. 3 (1968). Accessed December 30, 2021. https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1931&context=flr. This was a 1968 report on the increasing workload controllers were forced to handle while equipment and standards remained set in the past. It provided me with important
historical context on the complexity of air traffic control and how the economic circumstances exacerbated the strain.

This article explains Robert Poli's background and his relation to PATCO. It describes how he rose to power and how militant yet contradictory he was. I learned how poor a leader he was as well as the ironic confidence he had in the strike.

This primary source photograph depicts PATCO strikers outside a facility in New York. It helped me understand the demographics of PATCO and the spirit they had during the first month of the strike but also how tragic it was for controllers when they realized they would never be rehired.

This 1981 article describes how desperate the FAA was for controllers. It explains controller benefits and disadvantages and advertises the position to readers. I used the source to understand the taxing job controllers have as well as how much air travel was impacted by the strike even seven years after.

This 1981 article describes the calamity airlines, airports, and passengers were in and the additional forms of transportation travelers looked for. It helped me understand how much chaos the strike caused with worries of how unsafe it was to fly at this time.

This 1991 reflection on the strike helped me understand public opinion of the strike in the decade after it occurred. It also provided me with critical insight into the risk and the exhilaration that controllers felt on the job.
This primary source was written in 1981 before PATCO members rejected the contract. It is a memo written by Lewis to Reagan aide Craig Fuller, and Lewis discusses the likelihood of the package being rejected, his predictions, and what he thinks of the contract. The memo helped me understand the collision course the government and controllers were on, even before they voted against the settlement.

This article helped me understand the impact of deregulation on airlines and controllers as well as how the airlines and the FAA worked together to break the strike.

This 1981 article describes the international support PATCO received from Portugal and how impactful that would have been if it had not been shut down. It helped me understand the coordination and cooperation essential to successful strikes and therefore one of the reasons why PATCO's strike failed.

This 1981 article details the international support PATCO received. It describes the countries involved in the boycott and what controllers there thought of the strike. It helped me understand how widespread the strike was but also how determined the FAA was to break PATCO.

This 1981 article portrays the PATCO strike on the front page. It includes images of Reagan and strikers and describes the strike from multiple angles. I used it as an appendix to demonstrate how immediately important and impactful the strike was.

This article describes why controllers and the FAA were so diametrically opposed. It references a study analyzing the personality types of controllers versus supervisors and blames the inherent discontent between the two groups on the characteristics and demographics of the naturally attracted applicants. It helped me understand why there was so much conflict in facilities and the complexity of controllers' jobs.

This is a 1969 article on controller working conditions. It describes the lack of protections controllers have, the FAA's disregard for valid studies on their poor employee-management policies, and helped me understand why they needed a union.

This 1981 news broadcast on the strike depicts the inside of a busy, delayed airport with irate passengers. It was interesting to see the different perspectives on the strike, and it helped me understand how negative public opinion was a crucial reason why the strike failed.

This 1981 news report on the strike was critical to my research. It explains local's—including inconvenienced passengers—attitudes toward the strike, FAA supervisors, and striking controllers. I used it to understand perspectives toward the strike at the time and for direct quotes in my paper.

This primary source is the contingency plan the FAA made in preparation for a strike. It provides very detailed explanations of how the government planned to respond to a strike. The document helped me understand how prepared the FAA was for a strike as well as how oblivious and foolish PATCO was.

This court hearing provided resources that were critical to my research. It helped me understand the differing perspectives of the FAA and controllers and provided me with relevant primary sources that I used throughout my research.

This 1981 newspaper article describes how well-prepared the FAA was for the strike. They had been making preparations since January 1980, and this source helped me understand how foolish and doomed the PATCO strike was before it even started.

This 1981 article discusses the failed diplomacy between controllers and the government. It explains the perspectives of each side and helped me understand how Poli foolishly twisted the government's generous offer into simple tokenism.

This report by PATCO on why controllers were "forced to strike" helped me understand their militant motivations and demands. It provided important statistics and helped me better comprehend controllers' intractable perspectives.

In this video of Regan's Labor Day speech, Reagan defends Polish workers' cause as well as the right of unions to collective bargaining. It was interesting to learn about how a Republican president known for starting a conservative era actually appeared rather moderate in his stances prior to the PATCO strike. This video helped me understand Reagan's unprecedented leniency with the controllers but also his firm, hard line on what it means to break the law.

This is a 1981 interview by the Cleveland Plain Dealer of Ronald Reagan. The interviewer asks Reagan about potentially rehiring strikers and he firmly and irritatedly reminds the public that PATCO broke the law when they went on strike and that it is not fair to controllers who stayed on to rehire them. It helped me understand his hostility and unyielding attitude towards controllers.

This is the manuscript of Reagan's letter to Poli. It provides context for why PATCO endorsed such a conservative president and helped me understand why they were so hopeful yet foolish going into negotiations.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEqOSzgQNhl.
This primary source shows Reagan delivering the ultimatum to controllers in the Rose Garden. I used it to understand what controllers were forced to decide and how his unprecedented hostility towards unions completely defied controllers' expectations as well as what it meant for the future of all labor.

This 1981 article explains the AFL-CIO's response to the strike. It describes the little they did to help PATCO and why they were so hesitant. It helped me understand the rest of the world’s perspective on the strike. Interestingly, some had already predicted PATCO's doom and how it would forever alter the course of labor relations after.

This article was written on October 21, 1981, and it already claims that PATCO's doom would have implications for the rest of labor. It includes interviews of officials from other unions and their predictions on how future negotiations would be affected by Reagan's breaking of PATCO.

This source was essential to my research. Written by a 1981 striker and PATCO consultant, this primary source book provides fascinating, crucial information and includes controller testimonies, political cartoons, and articles. It was especially helpful for me to sympathize with controllers' perspective and how they felt their strike impacted the rest of labor.

https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1174232/.
This 1981 news report on the strike describes the impact of deregulation on airlines and how they were able to use the strike to their advantage in the long-term. It helped me understand the critical role airline cooperation played in the FAA breaking the strike and why PATCO should have partnered with ALPA.

This podcast interview of a fired striking controller Jim Paulei was critical to my understanding of how complex and demanding it was to be an air traffic controller. Paulei describes what controllers do, why he went on strike, and what he thinks of Reagan. It was an extremely interesting and educational interview that helped me understand the more human, emotional side of strikers—rather than how the media painted them as feather-bedded and ungrateful.

Tesh, Sylvia. "THE POLITICS OF STRESS: THE CASE OF AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL." *International Journal of Health Services* 14, no. 4 (1984): 569-87. Accessed December 27, 2021. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45131592?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. This analysis of the PATCO strike, specifically the health hazards controllers claimed they faced, helped me understand how stressful air traffic is as well as why people did not sympathize with controllers' supposed "stress." Interestingly, it states that when appealing for better working conditions, one should expand beyond scientific terms such as "stress" and instead explain in humanistic, natural terms to appeal to the emotional side of the public.


This 1980 article is about the AFL-CIO's endorsement of Reagan. It provides historical context for why everyone considers Reagan so anti-labor and helped me understand the significance of PATCO breaking with the AFL-CIO to endorse such a conservative president.

This article describes Poli's fake, publicly stated opinions on the new contract. It helped me understand how poor and politically lacking Poli was as a leader and how the press and public saw PATCO.

This article, written just two days before the strike, describes PATCO's rejection of the precedent-setting contract and both Lewis' and Poli's public statements. It helped me understand how not only the government but also the rest of the public perceived the demands and how foolish PATCO was to reject the offer.

This article explains PATCO's decertification and the appeal process that followed. It helped me understand PATCO's desperation and unwillingness to give up hope, even a year after the strike.

This New York Times article from 1981 discussed the obvious and unavoidable illegality of federal workers striking as well as the FAA's preparation for the strike. It helped me understand how inevitable, irreversible, and doomed the strike was from the start.

This article describes PATCO's rejection of Lewis' extremely generous contract offer and included quotes from air traffic controllers about what they thought of the package. It helped me understand general feelings toward the FAA and Reagan and the inevitability of a strike.
This article describes the tension during negotiations between PATCO and federal representatives. It explains how unreasonable Poli's demands seemed to the FAA and public. I used it to learn about the significance of what it means to illegally strike and why that, not even the inconvenience and economic consequences it had, was so crucial to the strike’s failure.

Secondary Sources

This article explains the political perspective of the strike. I used it to understand Reagan's opinions and ambitions as well as why it is interpreted as his first foreign policy decision.

This article explains the political perspective of the strike. I used it to understand Reagan's opinions and ambitions as well as why it is interpreted as his first foreign policy decision.

This CBS article on the 2017 induction of Reagan into the Labor Hall of Honor was very interesting to read. It helped me understand Reagan's conflicting legacy as a union leader as well as a union buster.

https://airandspace.si.edu/exhibitions/america-by-air/online/jetage/jetage08.cfm.
This website provided important historical context on airlines in the early 1980s. It helped me understand why Reagan's deregulation policies were anti-labor as well as why controllers were so discontent prior to the inevitable strike.

Early, Steve. "Strike Lessons from the Last Twenty-Five Years: Walking Out and Winning." Against the Current. Last modified September/October 2006. Accessed January 4, 2022. https://againstthecurrent.org/atc124/p113/. I used this source to understand the significance of both unions and strikes in maintaining the balance between employer and employee, rich and poor. It describes how the lack of striking backgrounds in workers today prompts worries that work stoppages and unions will completely die out and no necessary changes can ever be made.

Gammage, Jeff. "Drew Lewis, former U.S. transportation secretary, dies." The Philadelphia Inquirer. Last modified February 12, 2016. Accessed December 31, 2021. https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/20160213_Drew_Lewis__former_U_S__Transport ation_Secretary__84.html. This article provided important background on Secretary of Transportation and government negotiator Drew Lewis. It helped me understand why Reagan offered such a generous contract to controllers and how significant and foolish its rejection was.

"Gov WalkerReagan wannabe." Cartoon. Political Cartoons. Accessed January 4, 2022. https://politicalcartoons.com/sku/89740. This source is a political cartoon commenting on Governor Walker's comparison of himself to Reagan. I think it perfectly demonstrates the impact PATCO's strike had and how it still resonates in employers minds today—even if that was not his original intention.

Green, John. The Rise of Conservatism. Arizona State University, 2013. Accessed April 12, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCrxD19DHA8. This is a Crash Course US History video by John Green about the rise of conservatism. It helped me understand the impact of both economic and social changes on the political landscape of the mid to late twentieth century. I used it in my historical context section to understand why Reagan was so popular and thus how the public was so unsympathetic to PATCO.

Here's Why Reaganomics is so Controversial. Produced by History.com Editors. A&E Television Networks. Accessed December 26, 2021. https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/heres-why-reaganomics-is-so-controversial-video. This video on 'Reaganomics' helped me understand Reagan's economic policies and how detrimental they were to labor. It also was beneficial to grasping how conservative
Reagan was. I was surprised at how anti-union his policies were due to his past as a union leader and strike leader.


McCartin, Joseph Anthony. Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. This book was extremely helpful to me throughout my entire project. It includes extensive research, analysis, and citations. It provides important information on almost every aspect of the strike from PATCO's unexpected rise to its tragic demise, and was my most frequently referenced source.

McGrath, David. "McGrath: What Trump shares with Reagan, the Teflon president." Chicago Tribune. Last modified March 22, 2017. Accessed December 26, 2021. https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/daily-southtown/opinion/ct-sta-mcgrath-column-st-0323-20170322-story.html. I used this article, a comparison of Reagan and Trump, to understand how skilled Reagan was at manipulating people and escaping blame. It was interesting to discover the similarities and contrasts between two Republican presidents who have transformed our nation. The comparison to Trump emphasized how conservative and anti-union Reagan was.
This article provided extensive details on how controllers, the White House, and FAA officials reacted to the strike. It was key for me to understand the political atmosphere of 1981 and the unexpected, grim fall of PATCO. This was one of the first secondary sources I read, and it formed the foundation for further interpretations and ideas.


This source describes the decline of unions since the PATCO strike and provides several violent examples of strike breaking and settling after the strike. I used it to understand how even just a decade after the strike, unions were already dying.


This journal provided a detailed outline of the strike and what led up to it including PATCO's 1968-1980 job actions. It helped me understand the remarkable progress PATCO made for controllers as well as organized labor as a whole and how tragic it was when the strike was broken, controllers were fired, and PATCO was bankrupted and decertified.


This source provided a very in-depth description of the 1981 PATCO negotiations. It also explained why controllers went on strike by using knowledge of their demographics and workplace culture. The study helped form a foundation for my understanding of debate and diplomacy in the strike.


I used this website for primarily important statistics and learning what exactly controllers were demanding in the contract negotiations. It provided historical context for the strike as well as poll results, federal estimates, and numbers on labor’s decline.


This article reveals that the FAA falsified documents and blacklisted controllers. It helped me understand how poor controller-FAA relationships were, how much Reagan and his administration wanted to punish strikers, and how tragically it impacted PATCO families.

This journal helped me understand how important strikes are to maintaining workplace balance as well as how they empower unions. The ability to strike is inherent to capitalism, and this journal explored the role of striking in making needed changes for workers.


This safety manual by the FAA helped me understand how complex air management is and how skilled controllers must be. Although it is rather current, it helped me sympathize with controllers who claim their jobs are uniquely demanding.


This article details the catalytic role PATCO played in the corporate war against America's middle, working class. It condemns the hostile strike-breaking that followed the strike then and now. This article was essential for me to understand the impact PATCO had on today's labor politics.


I used this article to learn about PATCO's decertification.


This is an interview by someone from Buffalo Beast pretending to be conservative reporter David Koch so that Governor Scott Walker would give him information. In the interview, "Koch" and Walker have a casual conversation about breaking unions. They glorify Reagan and his union-busting, helping me understand PATCO's haunting presence in current employer's and politician’s actions.