

MORE THAN A LABOR DISPUTE: THE PATCO STRIKE OF 1981

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ABSTRACT

On August 3, 1981, 13,000 air traffic controllers walked off the job. Under US law, the strike was illegal. President Ronald Reagan ordered the strikers as a group to return to work; when they did not, he ordered individual strikers to return, and again they refused. Two days later, the president fired the strikers. Reagan's action transformed relations between organized labor and American management, and created the worst turbulence to hit the American airways in recent history. "More Than a Labor Dispute" examines the work stoppage and aftermath through the eyes of two controllers and a pilot, all of whom worked during the strike.

INTRODUCTION

"You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns."¹ William Jennings Bryan could not have anticipated an air traffic controllers dispute with management eighty-five years after his "No Cross of Gold" speech to the July 1896 Democratic national convention; yet his inspired oratory captures the temper of striking controllers in 1981. Like the Pullman and Homestead strikes of 1896 on which Bryan drew for his text, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike of 1981 failed to resolve conflicts over working conditions, wages, and retirement.²

On August 3, 1981, nearly 13,000 of the 17,500 members of PATCO walked off the job, intending to disrupt the nation's transportation system and force the federal government to concede to their demands for better retirement benefits, higher wages, and a shorter workweek. At a White House Rose Garden press conference that same afternoon, President Ronald Reagan reacted with a strong ultimatum: the strikers must return to work within forty-eight hours or face termination. As federal employees the controllers were in violation of the no-strike clause of their employment contracts and subject to a fine or one year of incarceration.³

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In 1981 air transportation was a \$30 billion-a-year business. Everyday 14,000 commercial flights carried 800,000 passengers—60 percent of them on business trips—and 10,000 tons of cargo. Airlines employed 340,000 people. Markets that retail fresh fruit, flowers, and fish depend on swift air transport, just as health care services look to air transport for blood supplies, the financial system for paper fund transfers, and automobile and housing industries for spare parts.⁴

PATCO strikers expected the grounding of the air transportation system to bolster their position, but the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) contingency plan functioned smoothly and minimized the strike's effect. Two thousand non-striking controllers and 900 military controllers joined approximately 3,000 supervisors in manning the Air Traffic Control (ATC) system, and airlines at major airports reduced their scheduled flights by 50 percent during peak hours. PATCO strikers decried the reduced level of air safety as a consequence of the sixty-hour workweek put in by their replacements. The threat to safety was offset by the 33,000 members of the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA), who increased their vigilance and monitoring and diminished the risk of an "aluminum shower," as controllers euphemistically call an air accident. "Before long, about 80 percent of airline flights were operating as scheduled, while air freight remained virtually unaffected."⁵

Within four weeks of the strike, the FAA's Oklahoma City training school received more than 45,000 applications from people interested in the seventeen to twenty-one week course. The school normally graduated about 1,500 controllers per session but considered increasing that number to 5,500.⁶

The strike disrupted air travel, private and corporate investments, large and small businesses, and personal lives. Pilots saw their flights cancelled and a dramatic increase in the wait-around time between flights. Airlines staged crews at hub cities to cover flights that would otherwise have been left without pilots and flight attendants. When flights received Air Traffic Control instrument clearances, the pilots saw fewer aircraft and heard less radio chatter.

CONDITIONS BEFORE THE STRIKE

PATCO striker Robert Devery's statement to *Business Week* suggests that strikers were looking for respect:

The strike is a result of frustration that's been building up for years. We're not on strike over money. Not 10 or 20 percent of these people would have

walked out over money. People are tired of being dumped on, and they want to make it to retirement.⁷

Controllers targeted stress as a primary motive for striking, stress driven by growing air traffic volume, faulty equipment, and autocratic management.⁸ PATCO's issues focused on threats to air-travelers' safety. Out-dated radar and communications equipment needed replacing. Stress and "harsh, disrespectful leadership that undermined morale and fostered retaliation"⁹ reduced air traffic controllers' workplace competency.

The strike made relations between the FAA and PATCO front-page news although there was nothing novel about their disparate positions. The relationship between the two had been turbulent since the formation of the union in 1968. Personnel at ATC facilities had conducted slowdowns and sickouts in 1968, 1969, 1970, 1974, 1975, and 1978 in their efforts to gain higher pay, larger staffs, improved training, fewer hours, and enhanced retirement benefits.¹⁰ These PATCO slowdowns affected other people and organizations, most directly the airlines. A one-day PATCO slowdown at Chicago's O'Hare airport in August 1980 cost the airlines almost \$1 million in excess fuel alone.¹¹ Most airline pilots did not support the strike—some described the slowdowns and sickouts as "an inappropriate and unpatriotic action."¹² Moreover, the public did not support PATCO's actions.

By 1980 the union had gained substantial benefits for controllers, including one of the best retirement systems in the country and the best collective bargaining position of any public-sector union. However, an "us-versus-them" state-of-mind had developed between the FAA and PATCO, a mentality reinforced by PATCO's assembling a strike force of militants to organize and lead the union and the FAA's creation of a strike contingency force. By early 1981 management-labor relations had deteriorated to an all-time low. Controllers complained of staff shortages, out-of-date equipment, limited opportunities for transfer, and harsh authoritarian management. Union members expressed increasingly militant views in the PATCO surveys completed prior to the opening of the 1981 contract negotiations. By March 1981, 78 percent of PATCO members were willing to back a strike.¹³

FAILED NEGOTIATIONS

When negotiations opened with the FAA in February 1981, PATCO President Robert E. Poli made ninety-seven demands including "seven grievances [that]

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dealt with economic issues, two with working hours, five with equipment, and sixty with various working conditions, including items such as facility lighting, dress codes, and staffing levels."¹⁴ The estimated cost of meeting PATCO's demands was \$770 million: an across-the-board wage increase of \$10,000 per year for controllers (whose pay ranged from \$20,462 to \$49,229); the reduction of a five-day, 40-hour workweek to a four-day, 32-hour workweek; and full retirement benefits after twenty years of service.¹⁵ PATCO contended that controllers were due these increases and quality of life improvements owing "to the highly stressful nature of their very important work."¹⁶ Devery and his fellow PATCO members asserted that controllers were striking to gain respect and protect their retirement benefits.¹⁷ PATCO insisted that public safety was at risk because controllers performed stressful work under difficult conditions—eight hours without a break—in return for low salaries—starting at \$15,000—and an unattainable retirement package. Controllers feared their stressful working conditions would drive them out of their jobs before they could collect full retirement benefits.¹⁸ Forty percent of controllers take disability retirement.

By focusing on the controllers' demand for a \$10,000 raise, the media and the government destroyed popular support for PATCO,¹⁹ and federal negotiators balked at the union's demand for reduced hours of work for increased remuneration. Men and women on both sides of the negotiations were aware that all federal employees would demand adjustments in hours and pay if the PATCO agenda succeeded, so all parties dug in for hard bargaining. The FAA made a \$40 million offer that included a shorter workweek, a \$2,500 pay hike, and a 15 percent increase in pay for night shifts (including those controllers who doubled as instructors).²⁰ The offer was enhanced after Poli and Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis negotiated, but after 95 percent of PATCO's members rejected the settlement, the FAA initiated its strike contingency plan.²¹

In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, James McGurrian, FAA Director of Labor Relations in 1981 and a participant in earlier negotiations with PATCO, shed light on the intransigence of PATCO leadership.

I was also there in the early morning hours of August 3, 1981, when Mr. Poli stated that a strike would occur at 7 a.m. even if all of PATCO's demands were granted. Two federal mediators and PATCO's chief lawyer also were there. The lawyer said nothing. Having known and dealt with Mr. Poli for many years, I had no doubt that the real issue was who would control the skies of America.²²

A July 27, 1981, letter from Poli to PATCO members describing meetings he had had in FAA controller regions illustrates the mentality of the union leadership seven days before the strike.

I have just completed a two-week schedule during which I had an opportunity to visit with members in the Southern, Southwest, Rocky Mountain, and Western regions. These trips are my sustenance . . . When I see members who, for the first time in their professional lives, are a family with their brother and sister controllers, I know that we are finally becoming a union in all of the positive sense of that word . . . I know that we must win because with that kind of resolve, losing is not a consideration.

By the time you receive this letter, the proposed contract will have been soundly rejected. That action will have set in motion a chain of events which may lead us back into the strike halls . . . We will be among those select few and cannot allow that opportunity to slip between our fingers.

You hold the key to the future in your hands. With your support we could make the air traffic control profession one that holds the hope of a meaningful future, instead of a mere pit stop enroute to medical retirement.

For years the controller work force has been legitimately complaining about the toll their job extracts in human terms. With your support, we will rectify that injustice. If you choose not to offer your support, you can never again be heard to object. The time is at hand—decide.²³

J. J. O'Donnell, the President of ALPA, recalls a May 1981 meeting with Poli, John Leyton (PATCO's president prior to Poli), and Jack Bavis (ALPA's Executive Assistant). Poli had announced that PATCO would have a strike that was a setup, for silent support from the Reagan administration as a cover to meet their demands. Poli said he had a commitment from Reagan in return for PATCO's endorsement of his candidacy in 1980. The strike would be short.²⁴

Ben Cleveland, who had helped found PATCO before moving into FAA management, confirmed that PATCO members were tricked into going on strike by Poli's misrepresentation of Reagan's position. Immediately before the strike, a regional vice-president of PATCO assured Cleveland that the strike was an inside deal, that it would be short and just for show. The strike was meant to give Reagan an excuse to cave into the controllers.²⁵ Cleveland, an FAA supervisor at the time, recalls:

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I knew it had to be another pile of Bob Poli's bullshit. The word was out in management that if those guys went out on strike, they were going to be fired, and no kidding! By then I was not in PATCO, just a friendly observer. I warned—nobody listened. Stupid leadership—that was Bob Poli.²⁶

The FAA refused to make further concessions, and on August 3, 85 percent of PATCO's members went on strike. When President Reagan threatened to fire all controllers who did not return to work within forty-eight hours, only 1,650 returned. The remaining 11,350 lost their jobs. PATCO was fined \$34 million and was decertified, the only federal union ever disciplined in this manner.²⁷

Morale among the strikers was shaky. Many reported later they thought Reagan and the administration would flinch. "I thought Reagan was bluffing," said one striking controller.²⁸ Controllers prepared to cripple the commercial aviation industry, which, they were certain, could not do business without them. "Sure it's illegal," said one picketer at Kennedy Airport, "so was the American Revolution."²⁹

Thousands of federal layoff notices went out on Wednesday. In New York, all striking PATCO members found themselves jobless and, because the strike was illegal, ineligible for unemployment benefits. "It's for real," said one FAA regional chief. "They chose to kid themselves into thinking this is not for real."³⁰

MEMORIES OF THE STRIKE

Bonny Adams reported for his shift the morning of the strike. He was assigned to the busy Atlanta departure control position, working the board (as the controllers call their radar console position) in the dimly lit room beneath the Atlanta International Airport traffic control tower. Adams had begun his career with the FAA in 1960, first working in Birmingham, Alabama, and Macon, Georgia, then transferring to the Atlanta facility in 1969. He retired in 1994, after thirty-four years in the industry.

Adams recalls a cooperative relationship between management and the controllers, but in the few years leading up to the strike, an intense hostility had developed between the two sides. "I went to some of those union meetings and listened to the speakers. Some would put our evangelistic preachers to shame. They worked those boys up to a frenzy." Adams recalls phone calls from the strikers. "'I can't ever go back to work,' one declared. 'I don't care if I lose my job or not; I can't go back to work in that environment.' They were worked up to a level where they were prepared to bring this government down."³¹

According to Adams, animosity began growing eighteen months earlier when the union membership replaced moderate leaders with militant controllers. The acrimony was directed not at pilots or the flying public but toward management. Adams accused supervisors of not “treating people properly; being honest, truthful, respectful; being upfront with them, and telling . . . workers what’s expected of them.”³² He recalled the experience of a controller friend who had grown up in a pro-union family in Birmingham, Alabama, but had become anti-union by the time he reached the Atlanta ATC facility. This friend had some difficulty checking-out in the radar position, which was common. Someone from the union encouraged him to complete the course. “Hang in there,” he was told. Adams says it should have been management, not the union, encouraging him to complete the checkout. The friend eventually joined PATCO and went on strike. When asked about a prime PATCO issue—the radar and communication equipment—Adams said that although some of the equipment may have been outdated at some of the smaller facilities, “I worked with good equipment throughout my career. I don’t know how anyone can complain about the technology we had, even in 1981.” To Adams, money was not the issue. “What would make a man who was drawing that kind of money go out on strike? The air traffic controller had no problem with the salary, so what would make him go out on strike?”³³

A striking controller, in a desperate bid to return to work stated . . . that he thought all along that the FAA was brainwashing the troops, but now he sees that it is the other way around and that the Union was the one doing the brainwashing. He stated he knew he would have to pay the consequences.³⁴

W. Curt Clower, one of the assistant chiefs of the Atlanta Air Route Traffic Control Center in Hampton, Georgia, knew he would be reporting for work on the morning of August 3, 1981. In a personal interview, seventy-year-old Clower revealed his keen memory of the events of that day and of the weeks and months following the strike. He collected evidence from the strike, letters from striking controllers, and reports of meetings held to determine if mitigating circumstances would allow a fired controller to return to work. Clower had entered the US Air Force in 1952 and was trained as a controller in Biloxi, Mississippi. When released from the military, he attended the new FAA Air Traffic Controller Training Academy in Oklahoma City and was a member of

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the first graduating class. He was assigned to Atlanta's radar center in 1956 and spent thirty-four years there before retiring in early 1990. His skills in scheduling and administrative detailing made him the unofficial contract administrator for the chief of the facility. Clower was asked by both sides to interpret and settle contract disputes and misunderstandings.

Like Adams, Clower recalled the increased hostility between PATCO and management in the two years before the strike. Dedicated PATCO members were harassing many of the non-union controllers, sometimes during actual aircraft controlling operations. Unlike Adams, who remembered verbal confrontations at the Atlanta airport radar facility, Clower recalled that as a supervisor, he could converse with PATCO members; he did not, however, agree with their methods and made this clear whenever possible. Clower, like Adams, lost many close friends in the ensuing fallout. According to Clower, 244 controllers in the ATL ARTCC did not report for work. All supervisors were called in on August 3. Clower remembers verbal harassment, but no vandalism, as he drove through the picket line that morning. Although he was on duty that day, he did not control any aircraft; supervisors, trainers, and air managers controlled aircraft. He did not recall his facility bringing in any military controllers, but many ATC networks did. The remaining controllers worked ten-hour, six-day schedules that continued for the following year.³⁵

Clower was one of three supervisors selected to interview striking controllers to determine if they had had legitimate excuses for not reporting for work. A General Notice (GENOT) received from FAA Headquarters in Washington, DC, outlined the guidelines for those officials designated to hear oral responses from striking controllers. The message states, in part, "As an introduction, the controller should be informed that the purpose of the meeting is to listen to any explanation why the intended removal [of the striking controller] should not be taken."³⁶ Clower and other supervisors were charged with firing the controllers and then evaluating appropriate explanations and making disposition recommendations. Prior to these meetings, each striking controller received a letter from Walter E. Denley, Chief of the Atlanta ARTCC. Under direction of the FAA, he had sent a letter to each of the striking controllers that stated, in part:

The foregoing action [the unauthorized work stoppage] constitutes a strike against the Government of the United States . . . This gives me reasonable cause to believe you have committed a crime for which a sentence of

imprisonment can be imposed. You may reply to this notice personally, in writing, or both . . . within seven (7) calendar days . . . In making a reply, you have the right to be represented by an attorney or other representative.³⁷

Clower's personal letters and interview reports bring three salient points into focus: (1) The majority of the striking controllers apologized for their actions; (2) they did not think things would go as far as they did; and (3) they wanted their jobs back. In many cases, this was the end of the road for careers, lives, and families. The following are examples of statements made during these meetings:

He stated that no one thought it would go this far . . . He had participated in the illegal strike . . . because of threats to his family and to himself . . . He again stated that what he had done was a mistake, that he had a guilt feeling and the whole thing was scary . . . He stated that the pressure from the union was more than he could take and that he just gave up. [Explanation follows]. Mr. X missed his assigned shift of 1545 on August 8, 1981. There appears to be no circumstances that prevented Mr. X from returning to work. Termination action should continue.³⁸

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL AFTER THE STRIKE

Ronald Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers a quarter of a century ago continues to influence American economic and political affairs. To some it marked a frontal assault that weakened organized labor, but others argue that unions were already in decline. The strike undoubtedly emboldened employers and furthered the decline of union power that began with the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947.³⁹

In his memoirs, Reagan, a lifetime member of the AFL-CIO and aware that PATCO was one of the few unions to support his presidential bid, said, "I supported unions and the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively. But no president could tolerate an illegal strike by Federal employees."⁴⁰

On September 7, 1981, less than one month after the strike, in a bid to show Republican labor support, Ronald Reagan traveled to New York with a federal check for \$85 million in long-awaited construction funds. During the city's first Labor Day Parade in thirteen years, 700 former air traffic controllers were designated as honorary marshals. Although air traffic controllers were anticipating a settlement, the President paid no attention to them.

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George Becker, president of the United Steelworkers of America, said in an article devoted to restoring respect for labor after the PATCO strike:

Twenty years later, this invitation [from corporate leaders] to “relations by confrontation” still holds a receptive audience among a certain breed of manager who believes that dictating rather than managing will automatically make the mill more productive and profitable—an end he then pursues no matter the cost. The formula is simple: flood the plant with paramilitary guards, provoke a strike, hire permanent replacement workers, and try to resume production. However, the cost is consistently higher than such managers anticipate.⁴¹

While labor wrestled with the meaning of the PATCO strike, business was encouraged. From the corporate perspective, there had been a slow but steady erosion of management’s willingness and ability to stand up to labor in the postwar period. The PATCO strike gave employers the confidence to act. As a result, workers were far less secure than before. PATCO’s actions and the resulting fallout emphasized that even the most skilled workers in critical positions were vulnerable. The controllers had thought their level of skill would assure their job security. Ultimately, it was easy to replace them.

To Harley Shaiken, a labor expert at the University of California at Berkeley, a key lesson labor has drawn “is the need to reach out to potential allies.”⁴² Shaiken explains that this tactic has proven successful for janitors in recent years in their national “Justice for Janitors” campaign for better contracts.

Ironically, janitors have proved more difficult for employers to replace than were air traffic controllers. Why? Because the air traffic controllers relied on their job skills alone. The janitors relied on a broader set of alliances within labor and between labor and the community. Janitors have gone on strike and they have won.⁴³

In contrast, there was not much support for the PATCO strikers. The public sided with the government and showed little sympathy for individuals whose earnings were already well above the national average. The media focused on the \$10,000 pay raise and the violation of the no-strike pledge but ignored the controllers’ other concerns. PATCO leaders were sent to jail for ignoring court injunctions against a strike. The Justice Department proceeded with indictments

against seventy-five controllers. Federal judges levied fines against the union amounting to \$1 million a day while the strike lasted.⁴⁴

About 1,600 of the dismissed strikers returned to work. Of the four absent workers allowed to return to work at Atlanta's radar center, all had legitimate excuses for not reporting on the day of the strike. One had spent a week of annual leave in the North Georgia Mountains, with no radio or television. He did not hear about the strike until he and his family were in their car returning home. He promptly called the ATC facility and was told to report for duty the following day.⁴⁵

In 1993 President Bill Clinton rescinded the no-hire pledge, the lifetime ban declared by President Reagan on the rehiring of the strikers by the FAA. This opened the door for fired PATCO members to return to work if they met requirements for a position, not an easy proposition after years away from the boards. According to Art Shostack, eight years after the rehiring ban was lifted only 836 (17 percent) of the 4,988 original applicants had been rehired. The new controllers union, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), insists that a minimum of 25 percent of new hires be drawn from the PATCO waiting list.⁴⁶

NATCA was established after PATCO's demise. Despite starting with a clean slate in 1981, the FAA did not change its approach to labor relations, and less than five years after dismissing the majority of its work force, controllers began organizing. The issues raised were similar to those cited during the PATCO strike: long hours (including mandatory overtime) in a stressful occupation, old equipment, and dictatorial management practices. Elections were held, and the controllers overwhelmingly voted to organize.⁴⁷

NATCA, which boasts a membership rate of over 80 percent, has begun organizing the non-federal air traffic control towers. NATCA's rhetoric sounds familiar: "We take pride in the safety record of the American ATC system, and as the FAA continues to push to cut costs and corners . . . we will stand sentry to ensure . . . the safest air traffic system in the world."⁴⁸

Whether or not President Reagan's lifetime ban was an overreaction or a necessary decision, evidence of a potential controller shortage is growing. The US General Accounting Office estimates that about 5,000 controllers may retire in the next five years, more than twice the number of retirements in the last five years. "The FAA has yet to develop a comprehensive human capital workforce strategy to address its impending controller needs." The FAA insists "it will be able to hire and train enough controllers to fully staff the ATC system" and

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has a "10-year plan . . . to hire an adequate number of controllers to fill those positions."⁴⁹ The new controllers' union warns, however, that the profession is about to experience the final aftershock of the PATCO strike.

The controllers' union is not alone in sounding this alarm. According to Joseph Kisicki, former director of training and higher education for the FAA and currently area manager for Diversified International Sciences Corporation, a large number of employees hired following the strike of 1981 are approaching retirement. He notes that growing job dissatisfaction and constrained budgets exacerbate the problems of shifting to new technology while operating outdated equipment. Of the 23,000 active controllers, 15,400 control aircraft. Attrition has been low, with retirements running fewer than 200 a year, but retirements will increase starting this year, for those who were hired in 1983 now have the requisite twenty years of continuous active service for retirement. By law, anyone controlling or directly supervising ATC operations must retire by age fifty-six. Kisicki predicts that the number of controllers who elect to retire will increase to 500 per year during the next three years. By 2007, almost 1,300 will be eligible to retire, and in 2017, that number will increase to 1,700 per year.⁵⁰

How fast can the FAA spool up training when controllers begin leaving in numbers? New hires start with a twelve-week training program, which only half complete. After two-to-four years of on-the-job training at field facilities, controllers can become fully certified. Even though the FAA does not anticipate a problem, more training will be needed to master the new tools and technology the agency requires. Unfortunately, funding for training has often been a low priority and, as in the PATCO days, labor issues with the controller's union could slow the pace of hiring and training controllers. NATCA warns that dissatisfaction could lead to a large loss of employees, leaving the FAA scrambling. "It takes 3-5 years to train a controller, but only one bad afternoon to retire," said John Carr, NATCA's current president.⁵¹

FAA Administrator Marion Blakey, speaking at the National Air Traffic Controllers Association legislative conference held in May 2004, affirmed that the retirement bubble is real and the FAA's training and hiring practices must be modified to accommodate the anticipated surge in retirements. She offered several new ideas for attracting recruits and retaining the most senior and experienced controllers. Pointing out that some airlines do not pay for pilot training, Blakey suggested asking new controllers to pay for their initial training, which has historically been assumed by the agency. For those who cannot afford the cost, the FAA could consider a pay-back-when-employed arrangement. In

addition, the FAA, as instructed by Congress, is considering a proposal that would extend the waiver for retirement at age fifty-six. Along more conventional lines, NATCA is proposing the hiring of an additional 1,000 controllers per year for three years.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Twentieth-century technology and modern business paradigms have eliminated many traditional sources of labor-management conflict by fostering less adversarial relationships based on an integrated business model. A labor-management environment of unity and trust would generate “more creative, useful, and interesting tasks, reduce hazards at the workplace, and even lead to [fewer work hours] and more leisure time.” Historians David Noble, Harley Shaiken, Barbara Garson, and Ronald Howard agree with Harry Braverman, who argues there is a “fundamental conflict of interest between workers and capitalists.” Why the government and PATCO failed to resolve their conflict goes beyond wage and benefit issues to control of the workplace, a conclusion based on labor-management disputes and the FAA’s and PATCO’s former negotiation strategies.⁵³

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