Air Traffic Controller's Strike - (1981)
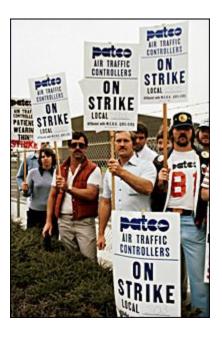

Striking air-traffic controllers picket outside of the FAA headquarters in Fremont, Calif., Aug. 4, 1981. **Roger Ressmeyer/CORBIS hide caption**

Roger Ressmeyer/CORBIS

In August 1981, President Ronald Reagan fired thousands of unionized air-traffic controllers for illegally going on strike, an event that marked a turning point in labor relations in America, with lasting repercussions. In the decades before 1981, major work stoppages averaged around 300 per year; today, that number is fewer than 30. A look at key events before the strike, and after:

1968: The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization is created.

February 1981: New contract negotiations open between PATCO and the Federal Aviation Administration, which employs the air-traffic controllers. Citing safety concerns, PATCO calls for a reduced 32-hour work week, a $10,000 pay increase for all air-traffic controllers and a better benefits package for retirement. Contract negotiations with the FAA stall.

Aug. 3, 1981: About 13,000 PATCO members go on strike after unsuccessful contract negotiations. In doing so, the union technically violates a 1955 law that bans strikes by government unions. (Several government unions had previously declared strikes without penalties.) President Ronald Reagan declares the PATCO strike a "peril to national safety" and orders the controllers back to work.

Reagan warns that striking is illegal for public employees, and that anyone who does not return to work within 48 hours will be terminated. A federal judge finds PATCO President Robert Poli to be in contempt of court, and the union is ordered to pay a $1,000 fine for each day its members are on strike. About 7,000 flights are canceled.

Aug. 5, 1981: Most striking air-traffic controllers are fired. Reagan bans them from ever being rehired by the FAA. They are initially replaced by controllers, supervisors and staff personnel not participating in the strike and in some cases, by military controllers.

Aug. 17, 1981: The FAA begins accepting applications for new air-traffic controllers.

Oct. 22, 1981: The Federal Labor Relations Authority de-certifies PATCO. Later, new air-traffic controllers, hired in the wake of the strike, organize a new union to represent them, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

June 19, 1987: NATCA is certified as the sole bargaining unit for air-traffic controllers employed by the FAA.

Aug. 12, 1993: President Clinton ends the prohibition on rehiring any air-traffic controller who went on strike in 1981. (To date, the FAA has rehired about 850 PATCO strikers.)

Oct. 3, 1996: Congress passes the Federal Aviation Reauthorization Act, which codifies NATCA's ability to bargain collectively with the FAA for wages and personnel matters.

Reagan fires 11,359 air-traffic controllers

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On August 5, 1981, President Ronald Reagan begins firing 11,359 air-traffic controllers striking in violation of his order for them to return to work. The executive action, regarded as extreme by many, significantly slowed air travel for months.

Two days earlier, on August 3, almost 13,000 air-traffic controllers went on strike after negotiations with the federal government to raise their pay and shorten their workweek proved fruitless. The controllers complained of difficult working conditions and a lack of recognition of the pressures they face. Across the country, some 7,000 flights were canceled. The same day, President Reagan called the strike illegal and threatened to fire any controller who had not returned to work within 48 hours. Robert Poli, president of the Professional Air-Traffic Controllers Association (PATCO), was found in contempt by a federal judge and ordered to pay $1,000 a day in fines.

On August 5, an angry President Reagan carried out his threat, and the federal government began firing the 11,359 air-traffic controllers who had not returned to work. In addition, he declared a lifetime ban on the rehiring of the strikers by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). On August 17, the FAA began accepting applications for new air-traffic controllers, and on October 22 the Federal Labor Relations Authority decertified PATCO.