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Ramifications of '81 PATCO strike still being felt

Georgetown professor tells Pacific Northwest Labor History Assoc. of the broad impact the strike had on labor

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Historian Joseph McCartin set out to study the 1981 air traffic controllers strike, and ended up knee-deep in a historical mystery: What caused the sudden death, or near-disappearance, of the strike?

After 1980, American workers stopped going on strike. The year before, there had been 235 major strikes (strikes of more than 1,000 workers), in which over a million workers took part. Last year there were 20, involving just 70,000 workers.

McCartin, associate professor of history at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is writing a book about the air traffic controllers' strike, in which President Ronald Reagan fired 11,359 federal employees. It was the symbolic beginning of an era of union-busting and permanent replacement of strikers. Though work on his book is still under way, McCartin shared his conclusions May 12 with a Portland audience of amateur and professional labor historians at the annual meeting of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association.

McCartin said overwhelmingly, the members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) were white male ex-military, having learned their profession in the armed services. They were among the highest-paid federal employees, and had skills that it took at least three years to acquire.

Their union was politically conservative, and backed Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. They wanted the Federal Aviation Administration to agree to better working conditions, better pay and a shorter workweek. Reagan, a former leader of the Screen Actors Guild, told them he understood their grievances.

But they came to feel he betrayed their trust. FAA didn't budge in contract negotiations. It is illegal for federal employees to strike, but others had done so without repercussions. When PATCO members struck on Aug. 3, 1981, Rea-

gan told them to return to work within 48 hours or be fired and permanently banned them from federal service.

They thought their strike would bring commercial aviation to a halt, and that public opinion would not tolerate it. But one in 10 strikers crossed the picket line, and kept airport control towers operating alongside managers and military controllers. And the public rallied around Reagan for standing up to so-called "union blackmail," McCartin said.

It was a disaster for labor.

But for McCartin, the PATCO strike was not a singular, exceptional event. It was the most prominent example of a pattern. McCartin found a remarkably similar strike in 1977 in Atlanta, when about 1,300 sanitation workers represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) were permanently re-



JOSEPH McMARTIN

placed by Democratic Mayor Maynard Jackson after a 48-hour ultimatum.

Looking at the statistics, the pattern is unmistakable. From 1947 to 1977, the strike had held steady. American workers were surpassed only by Italy and Finland in the number of workdays per year lost to strikes. The 1950s were the most strike-prone decade, with an average of 352 major work stoppages a year. The 1960s averaged 283 a year, and the 1970s averaged 289. And then it dropped, dramatically to 83 a year on average in the '80s, 35 a year in the '90s, and 23 a year so far in the '00s. February 2003 was historic, says McCartin — the first month, since the Bureau of Labor Statistics started keeping track in 1947, that not a single strike of more than 1,000 workers was begun anywhere in America.

For McCartin, understanding why

workers stopped striking is an intriguing historical puzzle — and may be the key to reviving labor.

McCartin has come up with several explanations.

One is the example of the PATCO strike itself. Every city had an airport. It was the most widely publicized strike since World War II. So it was a defeat felt all over. It showed the impotency of the labor movement. Workers saw what could happen, and employers felt that permanently replacing strikers had been legitimated by the president of the United States.

So permanent replacement became a much more common response to strikes. The U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in 1938 that strikers couldn't be fired for striking, but could be "permanently replaced." Of course, that stripped the hard-won legal right to strike of much of its meaning. But employers seldom used the right to permanently replace strikers, because it was considered unfair and draconian by the public. Before 1980, employers hired permanent replacements in less than 2

percent of strikes. In the 1980s, they used permanent replacements in more than 14 percent of strikes. And adding to the psychological impact on workers, permanent replacement was often a feature of big highly-publicized strikes — Hormel, Phelps-Dodge, International Paper, Greyhound. So workers came to believe that if they struck, they would lose their jobs.

Their willingness to strike was also hit hard by the bad economy. Unemployment reached a post-war high of 9.7 percent in 1982, which meant that in theory, other workers were ready to take strikers' jobs. The poorest workers were more desperate: The minimum wage was not increased at all from 1981 to 1990.

Deindustrialization and globalization picked up speed in the 1980s. Basic manufacturing — labor's stronghold and the birthplace of the mass strike as a vehicle for workers to get a greater share of increasing productivity — was more and more headed overseas. Containerization was making it much easier to ship goods, meaning that workers in different parts of the globe were now in competition with each other. The cascade of U.S. plant closings and mass layoffs that began in 1980s have never stopped to this day.

And deregulation, begun under President Jimmy Carter, had an effect, introducing competition into highly regulated and densely union industries. Airlines were deregulated in 1978, followed by trucking in 1980, which undermined the Teamsters master freight agreement.

The U.S. had its first trade deficit in 1971, but deficits shot up after 1982, and even more after 1997.

Finally, McCartin says, there's been a shift in the labor movement brought on by the emergence of public-sector union power. From 1955 to 1975, the number of public-sector union workers rose 10-fold. By the end of the 1970s, public-sector workers were more likely to be union than private-sector workers. And that affected the public's perception of strikes.

"Striker replacement was seen as unfair and divisive by the majority," McCartin said, "but when it comes to public-sector strikes, the public held a slightly different view. Private-sector strikes were against profit-seeking cor-

(Turn to Page 6)



A strike by air traffic controllers on Aug. 3, 1981 led to a showdown with President Ronald Reagan: He gave them 48 hours to return to work or be fired. The air traffic controllers didn't blink, and 11,359 were fired. It was the symbolic beginning of an era of union-busting and permanent replacement of strikers that has continued to this day.