



Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America

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On August 3, 1981, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, representing 12,000 federal employees, called an illegal strike. Ronald Reagan, president for less than seven months, fired the strikers, establishing a reputation for prompt resolution, not to mention hostility toward organized labor. But as Joseph A. McCartin writes, the PATCO strike was much more than a single, turning-point labor dispute. It was the culmination years of high-stakes conflict, recurrent airline disasters, and the tragic struggles of individual air traffic controllers whose actions repeatedly saved lives, but who could not save their union. The fall of PATCO not only ushered in a long period of labor decline, but served as a harbinger for the current campaign against public sector unions that now roils American politics.

In Collision Course, McCartin sets the PATCO strike within a vivid panorama of the rise and near fall of the world's busiest air-traffic control system. He begins with an arresting account of the mid-air collision over Park Slope, Brooklyn, on December 16, 1960, that cost 134 lives and disillusioned controllers. Through the stories of controllers like Mike Rock and Jack Maher, who were galvanized into action by the Brooklyn disaster and went on to found PATCO, McCartin describes the intense camaraderie, professionalism, and ambition of those who sought to make the airways safer and their jobs less stressful while at the same time pushing their way into the middle class. Collision Course tells a story of escalating confrontation, political intrigue, and post-1960s generational conflict. Most of all, it tells the story of Reagan and the controllers, whose surprising courtship in the 1980 election led PATCO to endorse the Republican on the promise that he would address controllers' grievances. That brief fateful alliance triggered devastating miscalculations that changed the course of history, establishing patterns that still govern America's labor politics.

Gripping, incisive, written with an eye for detail and a grasp of the vast consequences of PATCO conflict for both air travel and America's working class, Collision Course is a stunning achievement.

Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America Details

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From Reader Review Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America for online ebook

Frank Stein says

This has to be the best history on federal government unions out there, made even more impressive because it is tied to the fascinating story of the most important event in late-20th century union politics, the breaking of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike of 1981.

McCartin, a labor historian at Georgetown University, starts with the first description I have read of the writing of Executive Order 10988 by President Kennedy in 1962, the order that allowed federal sector unions to engage in collective bargaining for the first time. McCartin shows that the order was an attempt, like many later executive orders on federal unions, to head off a more extreme legislative program for bargaining, which Kennedy worried would compromise national security. Though Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary at the Department of Labor, tried to incorporate most of labor's demands in the draft order, it was pared back by the administration to forbid bargaining on wages and deny an impartial mediation board.

Yet that order opened up the floodgates for a welter of unions and associations to compete for the loyalty of the air traffic controllers (among other federal workers). From the ATCA to the NAGE to, lastly, in 1968, PATCO, everyone wanted to win the support and dues of this relatively wealthy and somewhat militant group. PATCO won out through its feisty campaigning and the early support of F. Lee Bailey, the demagogic lawyer and flying enthusiast.

The internecine struggles between these three unions, and within these unions, however, actually dominated their early politics, even more than struggles with the FAA. When PATCO, almost immediately after its formation, initiated a slowdown that snarled air traffic across the country, its main goal was not to change working conditions but to win "dues checkoffs" at FAA centers to solidify the union's finances and push out competing groups. The government capitulated. An illegal PATCO "sickout" was organized by leadership in 1970 to cement its dominance in the field. Since they realized they couldn't get a majority of their own union to go along, it had to be organized in secret. The NAGE, forgetting solidarity for a moment, demanded that the leaders of the PATCO sickout be fired. After some of these layoffs did take place, PATCO allied with the Marine Engineers Benefits Association (MEBA) who provided monetary support and funneled campaign contributions to get the union's goals back in Congress and get the workers rehired (it worked).

As you can tell, this does get complicated and acronyms do proliferate throughout the book, but McCartin does an admirable job of explaining the importance of them all.

Though McCartin is obviously sympathetic to PATCO and the union's demands, he also does an admirable job of making the book as even-handed as possible. Still, in my mind, the facts he cites prove that PATCO was completely out of control and its actions damaging to the public welfare. It regularly engaged in devastating (and patently illegal) slowdowns that left millions of airline passengers stuck on tarmacs or even stranded in the air (imagine how much worse delays would be now if PATCO still existed). Its controllers occasionally misdirected airplanes or directed them into storms to punish airlines they disagreed with. Before the 1981 strike it demanded a \$10,000 across-the-board wage increase (even though its workers already made far more than the median family income at the time) and threatened a strike, both of which actions

were illegal. Even after Reagan, whom PATCO famously endorsed in 1980, gave into many demands and promised wage increases and reduced hours, the leadership reversed its early agreement with him and refused the contract, partially because they worried militants would stage a strike anyway and the resulting division would "destroy the union." In my favorite example of the union's perfidy, it fired 5 staff members who had the gall to form a union of the union's own staff. What's good for the goose is not good for the gander apparently.

In any case, the book is able to elucidate the complicated processes of federal sector bargaining and union politics with a verve and skill that I have never seen equaled. This book should be required reading for anyone who cares about the national government or union politics.

J.S. Green says

Several years ago I saw an interesting but depressing movie with Michael Douglas called "Falling Down." It starts off with Douglas sitting in Los Angeles freeway traffic, except the traffic isn't moving at all and there seems to be no reason. He gets so frustrated that he gets out and just walks away from his car. He tries to get change at a small market to make a phone call - he's late for his son's birthday party - but the owner says he has to buy something. Unfortunately, everything is over a dollar and he gets angry and ends up smashing up a bunch of shelves. Then he's confronted by some gang members but he chases them off and things keep escalating. He thinks of himself as "standing up" for all the people who've been taken advantage of, and it's easy to relate to his frustrations. Unfortunately, he's actually gone crazy and the title "Falling Down" is a clever twist on his presumed "standing up" for himself.

Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America by Joseph A. McCartin tells a similarly tragic but real story of the August 1981 strike. The Air Traffic Controllers union, PATCO, called for the strike in response to poor treatment and broken promises from the FAA over decades. They had endured poor working conditions in an overburdened system with little response or respect from the government. But as government (public) employees they did not have collective bargaining rights (something the FAA frequently exploited) and had signed a pledge not to strike. While they had engaged in "slow downs" causing worldwide delays and disruptions in air traffic, on August 3, 1981 they did the unthinkable and walked off the job.

Surprisingly, PATCO had supported Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign. Reagan himself had been president of the Screen Actors Guild (a private union) and had overseen strikes, and in return for his promise to make amends the union took the unusual stance of supporting a Republican candidate. And while Reagan offered an unprecedented package of wage and benefits increases, it fell short of the overly optimistic demands of the union. It was a matter of principles that drove the overworked air traffic controllers to call an illegal strike, but it was also a matter of principles that drove Reagan's decision to fire those who didn't return to their jobs within 48 hours, and hire new controllers in spite of the enormous cost to the government. The controllers thought they couldn't lose when they stood up for themselves, but ended up out of work with no other market for their highly specialized skills.

Although I wasn't even in high school yet, I remember the extensive news coverage of the strike and hearing grownups talk about it. I am neither pro- nor anti-union, but I minored in economics in college and have taken a number of Labor Econ and Negotiation classes and find the subject interesting. While I generally feel that unions are often more detrimental to the economy than beneficial, one of my teachers once said that any

company who had its employees unionize probably deserved it. In other words, if they'd treated their employees decently they wouldn't have to deal with a union. And Mr. McCartin does a very good job of showing the unfair conditions that led to unionization and its later militancy. You understand very well the principles the strikers felt they had to stand up for and why they were willing to put their jobs on the line. But at the same time he explains Reagan's generous offer and demonstrates why Reagan made it a matter of principle to dismiss them, even though it was a risky and expensive move.

But this is more than just the story of a strike that was broken in 1981 - it had profound implications for the labor movement and still reverberates today. I realize nothing could sound more boring than a history of the Air Traffic Controllers Strike, but Mr. McCartin brings it to life in a dramatic and personal way and mostly manages to keep it at arm's-length instead of vilifying either side. While I can easily see this being assigned reading in Labor Economics classes, I think it has much wider appeal and will be enjoyed by lots of history buffs.

Anthony Darienzo says

I am a retired Supervisory Air Traffic Controller. I spent most of my career at the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center, (including the years before, during and after the strike) a facility much mentioned in the book. Collision Course is a well written concise history of air transportation, air traffic control and the strike. I do not agree with many of the authors statements concerning first line supervisors at the New York Center being in essence, too tough or unconcerned.

One thing that isn't discussed is the fact that the FAA/DOT played fast and loose with the facts concerning how many controllers were working and the number of hours per week they worked, among other things. The Reagan administration obviously wanted the public to believe that everything was fine despite the fact that approximately 12, 000 controllers out of a work force of 18,000, were on strike/fired. It was widely circulated by FAA/DOT that everything was fine since we had way too many controllers on the payroll anyway--which was not true. I never saw this questioned by the media. If we indeed had too many controllers, who hired them? They didn't just walk in to a facility and start working. They were hired at the direction of senior management officials, the same people who were still running the air traffic service within the FAA at the time of the strike.

Notwithstanding the above, I highly recommend this book.

Robert Beveridge says

Joseph A. McCartin, Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America (Oxford University Press, 2011)

full disclosure: this book was provided to me free of charge by Amazon Vine.

I was born in 1968. So in 1981 I was thirteen years old, and I was growing up in a staunch Republican family (though one who preferred to get their news from MacNeil and Lehrer; I still haven't figured out how to reconcile that). I was not terribly politically aware, partially because of the atmosphere in which I was raised

and partially because the entire idea of politics was something of a mystery to me and I didn't really understand how Presidents were any different than kings or something like that. So at the time, when my parents, who are still staunch Reaganites, dismissed the entire ATC strike as something that needed to happen and was good for the country, it never occurred to me to question that, and by the time I did become politically astute enough to wonder about it, the entire incident had faded not only from my conversation at home, but from the media, and slipped into obscurity to the point where I had forgotten it even happened. So when this came across my Vine emails, I grabbed a copy because I had only the vaguest memories of the incident at all, much less how it might have changed America.

What a dash of ice water to the face.

Everyone—at least everyone I know who saw me reading the book and is old enough to have been around at the time—has an opinion on what really happened. Most of them struck me as being surface at best, rehashings of what the press were saying at the time, either a shallow regurgitation of the feelings on the left or an even shallower regurgitation of the feelings on what passes for the right these days. (I even had someone opine that Reagan's actions were taken in the name of “national security.” Were there talk-show hosts like Glenn Beck in 1981 and I was just too young to notice?) Joseph McCartin talked to many of the principals on both sides of the fight—those who were still alive in the early part of the last decade, anyway—and emerges with a picture that is, not surprisingly, a great deal more clear-headed than anything else I heard while reading it.

The basics: the nation's Air Traffic Controllers were a bunch who saw themselves as overworked and underpaid. (McCartin never comes out and says, explicitly, that this is true, but the feeling is definitely there—and this story starts in the late fifties, decades before any of the studies we now having that show Air Traffic Controller as one of America's highest-stress jobs.) Thus, in violation of governmental policy, they decided to try and form a union. Thanks to some help from sympathetic private-sector unions, they did so and, after a couple of false starts, came up with PATCO. Not all of the Air Traffic Controllers were behind PATCO, for various reasons, but enough of them were that when PATCO talked, people listened, especially when they used the language of slowdowns or work stoppages. (McCartin points out, ironically, that “slowdowns” involved the ATCs actually doing their jobs according to government strictures; the only way they kept air traffic flowing efficiently in the seventies was to break the rules.) But you know the end to this story: not long after Ronald Reagan's election, the ATCs went on strike, for various reasons detailed in the book, and Reagan broke the strike so ferociously that he effectively turned the tide of union action in America forevermore; no one strikes in the 2010s the way people struck in the 1970s.

You know what? Before I read this book, the last half of the last sentence in that paragraph is something I never really thought about, but once I was done with Collision Course, it made perfect sense. You see small bands of strikers today, usually out in front of the usual suspects (on the west side of Cleveland, it's usually Rite-Aid; as a former worker for a Rite-Aid subsidiary, I can sympathize), but a half-dozen, maybe a dozen people with pickets? That's greasy kid stuff compared to some demonstrations I saw growing up in Pittsburgh in the seventies. That's a direct result of Ronald Reagan. Some people see that as a good thing. There are times when I'm one of them, but McCartin traces the ripples, how much more is affected based on Reagan's handling of PATCO, up to and including some of Scott Walker's recent idiocies, and I am forced to be reminded that this stuff does not happen in a vacuum. Every action has consequences—many of them unintended, because Ronald Reagan, in the early months of 1981, could have no more foreseen the rise of the wacko-neocon movement any more than the Founding Fathers could have foreseen the dawn of the moving picture era. (Though one thinks, perhaps, it may have been on Reagan's mind when he decided to repeal the Fairness Doctrine in 1987.) But to get back to the original point I had planned to make in this paragraph, that's one of the strengths of McCartin's surprisingly readable little history: he not only focuses on the events

leading up to the strike and its breaking, but he ropes in all the little tangents, both on their way in and in the aftermath, and makes connections that the average reader wouldn't or, more importantly, that the average consumer of news, even in the days of the Fairness Doctrine, never even had the chance to mull over, because no one knew about all this stuff going on behind the scenes—and by the time it was too late, no one thought to connect any of it to PATCO.

I always hate reviews of nonfiction, especially academic nonfiction, where the reviewer says something like "it reads like a novel!". No, it doesn't, or it is, at best, "creative nonfiction" (a genre I am still not convinced actually exists). McCartin's book is quite readable for academic nonfiction, but it sure as hell doesn't read like a novel. Moreover, it shouldn't; you can almost feel McCartin's research on every page, and that lends the book a weight, and a gravity, it would not otherwise have. On the other hand, there are points where that makes it into something of a slog. That can't be helped, and not only is everything in here important, but there are stretches where McCartin can't get to some points of view on a particular subject, usually because the person he needs to interview is no longer alive, and so this probably could have gone another hundred pages or so and still left the astute reader asking some questions about little nooks and crannies that didn't get addressed. As far as a criticism, that is about as minor as one would expect; this is a good'un for students of recent history, as well as the politically active on both sides of the aisle who want to understand union culture in America today. *** 1/2

Kier O'Neil says

I am now 50% through this book and can now honestly raise my ranking from 2-stars to 3-stars. The author settled down and started offering facts and insights like a real documentarian. This book was only a few pages from being tossed into the proverbial fireplace. I still contend that this book is far too long. 500 PAGES!! I'm getting a huge backlog of books building up while I try to get through this one. I'm hoping that 15-20% of the book are references. Note: I'm reading the electronic version so I can only go with percentages. I had to look on Amazon to tell me how many pages it was. Overall, if you can survive the first 5-10% of the book then you'll have a good picture of federal labor relations during the 60's and 70's.

I have a feeling I may be the lone dissenter on the quality of this book.

It's currently rated 4.8 out of 5, and I will admit that I'm only 5% into this book according to Kindle, but I'm not sure that I'm going to make it through.

The author has a knack for exaggeration which is never good in a documentarian. He constantly tries to pull on the emotions of the reader for no apparent reason.

He's also made so many references to this one crash in 1960 that I want to scream, "I get it already!!".

This topic would be much better served under a better author but here we are.

The topic is important and I'm going to trudge forward but if the author can't settle down I'm going to have to throw this one on the scrap heap.

Lynn says

This is a very important book about a very important incident in US history. A union that had air traffic employees as its members named PATCO, decided to strike illegally for better pay and better working conditions. It defied a president who had been the only one to ever lead a labor union and he fired them all and banned them from finding jobs within the FAA. This happened when Ronald Reagan was president in 1981 and public unions never recovered from the strike. It has gradually led to the decrease in ability for unions to collectively bargain for their members and keep salaries and benefits within the cost of inflation and middle class living. The union initially began after 1960 when a terrible plane crash occurred that raised air traffic controllers ire over their overwork and increased responsibility. The number of air traffic controllers had stayed about the same through the 50s although air traffic had increased dramatically. The equipment they were using, the old green radar screen were becoming outmoded and unable to observe air traffic closely as more planes were flying. After constant lobbying with other public sector employees, John F. Kennedy allowed public employees to unionize but prevented them from negotiating pay or benefits which were Congress' domain. It helped but not much and air traffic control continued to be a stressful job with limited benefits. Through the 1960s, as agitation and the counter culture grew, the militancy of the controllers grew also. Younger employees refused the dress codes and hair lengths arguing that they were rarely seen by the public. More educated air traffic controllers felt able to question the methods of controlling and argue for more developing better ways. An all male workforce had to allow women to work with them and African-American men insisted they be treated well. As the 1970s came, inflation, wage stagnation and benefits brought lives to a stand still. People were becoming less and less able to live middle class lives and PATCO was increasingly asking for more. A strike in 1968 led to some dismissals but also an increase in wages and job safety regulations. Nixon in 1971, rehired the fired employees in exchange for their voting support. Ford seemed to be supportive of air traffic controllers as well. The relationship with Jimmy Carter was tense and he refused to budge when the nation was involved in such high inflation and an economic downturn. Reagan courted PATCO and he seemed to be on their side. Agitating for a strike for higher wages, Reagan shocked the air traffic controllers by appointing men who were hostile to labor on his cabinet. They pressed him for what they saw their due for supporting him in the election and wasted no time calling his cabinet members out and eventually himself. While many cautioned PATCO for going too far, they didn't see it and illegally struck. Eventually as the nation watched, they were fired. The quality of the controllers after that time was not good and there was a chronic shortage of them. Clinton eventually signed a bill to rehire some controllers but it was 12 years later and very few jobs were open. The impact of the strike was to weaken unions across the nation and gradually lower the standard of living for most Americans over time.

Lisa says

A pivotal moment in the recent history of American organized labor related by an author who clearly knows his subject. Contrary to what one might expect from the title, it's not just about the strike- it goes into the full backstory, presenting the history of air traffic controllers and organized labor and all that was simmering in the background leading up to the strike. In all honesty, it probably deserves a fourth star, but two things detracted from my enjoyment of the book. First, it was a bit distracting that the author kept switching back and forth in time. I like my history to stay chronological so I'm clear who did what when. Second, this is a densely written book with a lot to take in, and I was reading it on a deadline. (It got buried in my library pile

and I forgot it until the day before it was due back- new book, 14-day loan, non-renewable.) Admittedly, the second is my issue as opposed to a fault or flaw of the book, but I found it difficult to absorb so much so quickly. This is the rare book I would have liked to have some time to read in smaller chunks and digest.

Mark says

Ronald Reagan's response to the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike in 1981 has come to be seen as a seminal event for both his administration and in labor history. As Joseph McCartin notes in his history of the strike, Reagan's dismissal of the striking air traffic controllers has come to be seen as a signpost in the decline of organized labor in late 20th century America. Yet, as McCartin demonstrates, the strike and the dismissals was as much a culmination of a series of events as it was an indicator of things to come, one that can only be understood within a much broader examination of PATCO's history and the work of its members.

To that end, McCartin begins by chronicling the origins of the union in the 1960s. A product of growing concern by controllers over air safety, the early efforts by controllers to develop a unified voice evolved into a union by the end of the decade. Here McCartin spends considerable space describing working conditions, recounting a hierachal environment where controllers' concerns, particularly those regarding their workload and occupational stress, often went unaddressed. Upon its establishment in 1968, PATCO set out to redefine working conditions so as to reduce some of the pressures of the job and the toll it took on its members, winning a number of key concessions in their initial negotiations with the federal government.

PATCO's focus changed with the economic problems of the 1970s. With inflation eroding their members' salaries, PATCO started requesting increased pay and benefits in their contract talks. Here they faced successive Republican and Democratic administrations anxious to reduce inflation, yet conscious of the controllers' ability disrupt air travel in any labor dispute. In the 1981 contract negotiations the Reagan administration offered a number of unprecedented concessions, but the controllers – whose increasing militancy was fueled by a long list of workplace grievances and a belief that previous contracts had delivered less than was possible – felt that a strike would win further concessions to their demands. Once the strike began, however, the administration took control of the narrative, redefining it as a challenge to the government's power and rallying the public to its side. After giving the controllers 48 hours to return to work, Reagan fired the strikers, destroying PATCO and setting a new tone that has defined relations between organized labor and management ever since.

Written with sympathy and insight, McCartin provides a comprehensive account of both PATCO and the 1981 strike. By providing the context of the strike, McCartin sets it within the larger context of the labor, economic, and political history of America in the latter half of the 20th century, showing the larger forces at work and how the strike shaped subsequent developments. The result is an oftentimes tragic account of dedicated, hardworking people in stressful jobs on the losing end of a changing economic and political environment, one that remains relevant even three decades later. This is likely to be the definitive account of the strike, and can be read with profit by anyone interested in understanding the plight of the American worker today.

Brian says

Collision Course by Joseph McCartin provides an interesting look at the labor disputes of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) that led to the mass firing of Air Traffic Controllers during an illegal strike under Ronald Reagan's presidency. McCartin looks at the development of PATCO starting in the 1960's at its formation in what would become La Guardia. The author then tracks in very exacting detail the steps that formed PATCO and the efforts they undertook from sickouts to slowdowns to the preparations for an eventual strike against the oaths controllers signed the day they became controllers. This strike would become a monumental occasion marking one of the largest strikes in one of the most critical industries that had the potential to slide the American recession deeper and jeopardize hundreds if not thousands of lives. On the other side you have the incompetent management of the FAA that marginalized the requests of its workers and led to the build up of resentment that occurred during the 70's and into the 80's.

McCartin does an excellent job of looking at the angles from labors perspective and how it fit into the social consciousness of the time and the social trends of air traffic controllers. After 250 pages of this analysis Ronald Reagan enters the picture facing a volatile labor situation. One area that McCartin downplays was not only the air traffic controllers striking at this time but a possible postal worker strike were fomenting around the same time as the controllers. This combination combined with the public posture of the PATCO leadership led to an inevitable conflict that resulted in Reagan (the only president to lead a union) to fire every controller who went on strike. In doing so he cost the government huge amounts of money in lost training that had been spent on the controllers and his decision to not rehire any of them after the strike was finished changed the course of labor history. In this major movement the power of unions was challenged for the executive of the country emboldening many others to stand up to labor weakening unions for decades to come. Overall this is a very thoughtful analysis that does an excellent job of looking at all sides and while focusing on labor and PATCO does provide a balanced analysis of the situation and its impact on labor in the United States. Well worth the time for those who interested in the social history of the United States.

Todd Wilhelm says

This book had obvious appeal to me since I spent my career in the FAA as an air traffic controller and was always active in NATCA. Hired in April of 1983 and a charter member of NATCA I can identify strongly with the problems faced by PATCO. As McCartin stated in the book, within two years of Reagan firing all the PATCO controllers efforts were already underway by the new recruits to get a union to represent us. As we were known to say they fired all the controllers, but the heavy handed authoritarian management were all still in place. During my career in the FAA I had contact with several of the key PATCO guys mentioned in this book. Mike Rock taught 2 Fac-rep classes I attended at the George Meany Labor Center in Silver Springs, MD. He was an unforgettable character who was a great teacher. He could tell some stories! And he really instilled the union activist spirit in us. John Leyden addressed one of my classes one day and then went out with us to a bar where we were able to pick his brain. He impressed me as a very intelligent and articulate man who was totally a union man. He worked in some capacity for the AFL-CIO at the time. I had numerous interactions with John Thornton including debating him on Long Island in front of a bunch of different NY locals. He was attempting to convince NATCA of the benefits of privatization and I opposed him, arguing we were better off to stay under the federal government. I had the pleasure of working with Bob and Valerie Butterworth for two months in Philadelphia as a part of NATCA's "Boots on the Ground" campaign to help elect Obama. They were both very interesting people and enlightened me on so much of the history of PATCO. Bob was also a colorful story teller. I rank him equal with Mike Rock! Mike Rock died of cancer in 2004 and, in what I consider to be a strange coincidence, John Thornton passed away just this past Monday, November 4, 2013 as I was reading this book.

Concerning this book Valerie Butterworth wrote me that "We have read Collision Course and highly recommend it as the most accurate accounting of the history of PATCO!" If the Butterworth's (The Pres and Sis) recommend it you can count on it being good!

"For Jack Maher and Mike Rock, the story came full circle. The friendship they had formed in Hangar 11 in the aftermath of the 1960 collision had provided the bedrock upon which PATCO had been founded. Like so many bonds forged through PATCO, their connection lasted to the end of their lives. Maher paid a final visit to his friend in April 2004. The two had seen each other less frequently as time went on. Health problems had kept Maher from meeting Rock in Las Vegas at the twentieth reunion of PATCO strikers. But now it was Rock's health that was failing; he was dying of cancer. Their last visit took place in a hospital room in West Islip, just a few miles from New York Center, where in 1967 they had cohosted the first meetings of PATCO's predecessor, the Metropolitan Controllers Association. Maher knew it was a farewell visit, and braced himself to say goodbye. Although they had gone their separate ways after 1981, the two men had remained close. "It was a funny friendship, because we were so different in so many ways, Maher observed. "Even when we never did agree, we agreed to continue on." The warmth of their friendship was rekindled as they reminisced during their last visit. But it was what Rock said when it was time for Maher to go that stuck with his friend. "Well, it's the end of the road, Jackie," Rock said. "It's all over." Maher realized then that Rock had spoken these same words when the two had met on that tense morning in PATCO's safe house on August 4, 1981, as the union they had founded was locked in struggle with a president, with so much hanging in the balance.

Maher himself died four years later at the age of seventy-five. During the years between Rock's death and his own, he stayed in touch with PATCO veterans. He followed NATCA's contract negotiations and watched as the FAA struggled with a personnel crunch, as thousands of controllers hired after the strike began to reach retirement en masse. With growing concern, he also followed the labor movement's continuing struggles - its declining membership rates, diminished capacity to strike, inability to reform outdated labor laws. He also saw the storm clouds gathering, portending a deluge that might wash away the gains public sector workers had fought so hard for since the 1960s. As more and more private sector workers lost strong union protection, saw their incomes stagnate, their health care costs soar, and their retirements grow more precarious, Maher knew it would become easier for labor's opponents to isolate unionized government workers and characterize their salaries and pensions as inflated. He realized that an assault was coming against public sector unionism, the passionate cause to which he had devoted so much of his life. All of this convinced Maher that his good friend Mike Rock had been wrong about one thing after all: It was not over. PATCO's past was prologue - prologue to a story still unfolding."

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Online Eccentric Librarian says

More reviews (and no fluff) on the blog <http://surrealtalvi.wordpress.com/>

This is almost a textbook on the subject: very thoroughly researched and brimming with detail and information spanning several decades before and after the fateful PATCO strike. It is one of those books that will not leave you asking questions about the who, what, where, and when. However, when it comes to the

'why', I do feel the bias shows in the writer's perspective. That said, a subjectively written work on history means there is a passion behind the words that lift the facts above a deflavored historical event recounting. The writer clearly feels strongly about how the events unfolded and their consequences - and it's an important set of information to remember, especially topical in the current environment of 'occupy' movements around the world. I appreciated the point of view and clarity - as well as the writing presented in a simple, easy-to-read, and compelling manner.

There are lessons to be learned here for labor organizations, airline safety (the harrowing New York mid air collision at the start of the book is especially traumatic), and those interested in the politics of the Reagan era.

Highly recommended.

Ben says

By the late 1970s, pro-market republicans were winning the rhetorical battle over public sector union organizing, leaving Democrats little room to stake out their own positions—those friendly to the unions were painted as fiscally irresponsible, those taking an anti-union line seemed to be aping the Republican position. The war on public sector unions came to a dramatic head in 1981, when Ronald Reagan fired 11,345 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). The breaking of the strike was a tremendous loss for labor, as it “catalyzed a revival of strikebreaking that helped marginalize the strike as a feature of American labor relations.” Robbed of their most powerful bargaining tool, unions saw their strength greatly diminished in the wake of the PATCO strike. McCartin notes that while the strike “did not cause American labor’s decline, it acted as a powerful catalyst that magnified the effects of the multiple problems that beset American unions.” The weakening of the unions facilitated the redistribution of wealth toward financial elites that is a hallmark of neoliberal policy.

Michael Griswold says

Joseph A. McCarin in writing Collision Course: Ronald Regan, the air traffic controllers and The Strike that Changed America has written a readable, yet engaging account of the thirty year history of air traffic controllers efforts to unionize and the political ramifications of these efforts that eventually culminated in the 1981 strike and dismissal of controllers.

McCarin gets extra points for tying this history to present day efforts to curb the bargaining of public sector unions. The best history is not history alone, but can be applied on some level to events within the current world.

McCarin tries to write a balanced history complete with fleshed out descriptions of the background of the major players in the government and the air traffic controller's attempts to unionize. Though he does a decent job in this task, it often times reads as a history of airline traffickers' attempts to unionize.

I found myself getting a better picture of the traffic controllers than anyone within the government. This problem is remedied more in the lengthy section on the strike, but could've been fleshed out better in other parts. Still a marvelous and detailed history.

Bap says

Remember PATCO, the doomed union of air traffic controllers who in August 1981 called an illegal strike designed to force the federal government to sweeten its contract offer. The strike was illegal in two regards first it was attempting to force the Feds to negotiate concerning wages which is not permitted by federal law and more importantly strikes by federal workers are unlawful.

The union seriously overplayed its hand by not stopping at the brink when they had wrested concessions from the gov't but they had created such momentum for a strike and had whipped themselves into a frenzy that made a strike irresistible. Secondly, the 10,000 person union was devoid of allies. They had not sought the support of the Airline pilots union or from labor writ large. They had endorsed Reagan in the 1980 election and felt that they had an ally in the white house. So they hurled themselves heroically but foolishly off the cliff and ended up losing their jobs and having the union crushed.

This strike had huge consequences. By standing firm in his decision to fire the strikers, Reagan found that bashing unions was a ticket to immense popularity. As governor of California, Reagan had been conciliatory towards public unions, even those who engaged in illegal strikes. But the insane tactics of PATCO gave the big Gipper a golden opportunity to be tough. Thirty years later public employees are reviled by the right. Teachers, firefighters and cops are seen as corrupt and parochial in opposition to the public good in pursuit of their selfish designs, gov Walker invoked the ghost of PATCO when he sought to cripple public employee unions in Wisconsin last year even though he was on the offensive attacking unions not for breaking the law but by virtue of their very existence.

The PATCO strike's impact had far ranging consequences for private sector unions as well. Breaking strikes by permanently replacing strikers, once rare, has become commonplace for employers. If the president could do it, why not any employer. The number of strikes has drastically declined in the past thirty years and with the right to strike largely eliminated, labor's fortunes have waned. This directly impacts the ability to secure wage increases and accounts in no small measure for the declining fortunes of all workers and the vast increase of wealth for the top one per cent.

McCartin's account is masterful of the rise, the fall and destruction of militant unionism in the public sector. It also explains how a war on labor has gained legitimacy with the capitalists enjoying the vast spoils that have gone to the victor in this fight.

I have represented unions since 1977 and have dealt with the pernicious after effects of the PATCO strike during this period. Labor bears only a faint resemblance to the unions of my youth in the 50's and 60's when labor was near its peak in power and had a legitimacy that has gone with the wind. I remember my father being on strike for 112 days in 1962-63. The employers were rumored to be considering hiring replacements which triggered Harry Van Arsdale, the head of the NYC Central labor Council, to assemble 25,000 construction workers, longshoremen, teamsters and trade unionists of every stripe to join the picket lines. No replacements were ever hired. Those days of a muscular and militant trade union movement are a now distant memory.

McCartin's book is an important chronicle of a strike that changed America.

Pierre Lauzon says

This outstanding history begins with the December 13, 1960 midair collision between a United Air Lines DC-8 and a TWA Super Constellation over the skies of New York City. It ends with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker removing the rights of public employee union collective bargaining in his state.

The book goes through the history of U.S. air controllers and the formation of PATCO, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization. It follows the union through its demise after Ronald Reagan fired the striking controllers as their August 1981 strike began. The book shows in nuanced and balanced detail that both sides (FAA and the controllers) were right and also wrong in many tactics and decisions. It shows the sadness of the fired controllers who were forbidden from working for the only agency in the country that needed their skills.

I strongly recommend this book as a contemporary history of the labor movement in the United States and for aviation historians.
