

The LABOR Paper

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Viewpoint: PATCO's lessons for this crisis

by Joseph A. McCartin
from labornotes.org

A crowd of people hold red and white signs saying "Delete Doge"

The largest act of union-busting in history hit federal workers on March 27, evoking comparisons to Ronald Reagan's 1981 firing of 12,000 striking air traffic controllers. But there are important differences that should give us hope.

The closest historical parallel is Ronald Reagan's busting and decertification of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization. When 12,000 air traffic controllers initiated an illegal strike on August 3, 1981, and stayed out in defiance of Reagan's ultimatum, the federal government came down on them with all its might.

Many PATCO leaders were arrested, the union was bankrupted and decertified, and the strikers were permanently replaced and

banned for life from returning to the Federal Aviation Administration.

That very public defeat had a devastating impact. Coming as it did on the heels of concessionary bargaining that had already begun in auto plants and amid the explosive growth of the union avoidance industry, Reagan's action inspired private sector employers to imitate his strikebreaking in setting after setting in the 1980s, hiring replacement workers and either busting unions completely or forcing them into painful givebacks.

The bloodbath that flowed from a string of broken strikes made workers and unions reluctant to engage in walkouts for many years after. The annual average of major work stoppages fell from 289 in the 1970s to 35 in the 1990s. As unions lost the clout that strikes had once given them,

inequality widened, and a confident anti-unionism surged.

Given that 50 percent of the labor movement is now public sector (35 percent was in 1981), and public workers are already under attack in many states, Trump's union-busting could be even more catastrophic for public workers across the country. With public sector unions decimated, private sector unions will be more vulnerable to attack.

Yet we shouldn't despair. The lessons of PATCO can help us decide how to best respond to this crisis.

POPULAR APPEAL

First, we should appreciate the differences in context. The PATCO strike was waged by one small union that had distanced itself from the rest of labor by endorsing Reagan's election in 1980.

The strikers made no effort to garner public support and instead relied on what they believed was their irreplaceability (it takes years to train an air traffic con-

troller) and their unity (80 percent were prepared to defy the government's strike ban).

They struck against a president at the height of his popularity — Reagan's approval was around 67 percent, whereas Trump's is currently around 46 percent. They were demanding a hefty publicly funded raise at a time when other unions were engaged in concessionary bargaining and the public was facing double-digit inflation.

And air traffic controllers were invisible — many in the public didn't even know they existed until the strike.

Today's situation is radically different. Federal workers cannot be scapegoated as the aggressors. They are asking to be allowed to continue work in the public interest and to enjoy the rights to organize and bargain that have been honored by both parties for decades.

Lessons

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Workers Memorial Events:

(list will be updated as new info is available)

Galesburg - Monday, April 28

5:30 p.m. - 1640 N Henderson St, Galesburg

Peoria - Monday, April 28

6 p.m. - Workers Memorial Monument Site
Peoria City Hall, 419 Fulton St.

Bloomington-Normal - Monday April 28 at 6 a.m. at

White Oak Park, 1514 Cottage Avenue in Bloomington. The next evening, April 29, at 6:30 p.m. is a panel discussion in conjunction with the "Deadly Deception: Asbestos in McLean County" exhibit.

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Lessons

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Their chief tormentor, Elon Musk, is widely despised (with 38 percent approval), while Trump lacks the avuncular bipartisan appeal that made Reagan such a difficult political foe for labor.

In contrast to the controllers in 1981, the public knows and appreciates what its park rangers, Veterans Administration nurses, medical scientists, and Social Security workers do. Multiple constituencies who benefit directly from the work of government workers are available to be mobilized in their defense.

LABOR MUST SAVE ITSELF

Yet while the context is more favorable, the damaging impact of Trump's action will not be blunted or reversed without a fight. The PATCO story stands as a warning to anyone who believes that labor should hunker in a defensive crouch to survive the next four years.

Union strength has been more than halved since 1981; a similar diminution over the next decade will make the movement all but irrelevant. Neither courts nor politicians will save it; the labor movement must save itself by showing some fight.

In 1981, labor leaders limited their support of PATCO to staging sympathetic pickets, issuing public statements, and building the largest labor march in U.S. history, the Solidarity Day march of September 19, 1981.

But they were wary of engaging in civ-

il disobedience in support of an unlawful strike against a popular president. Whatever one thinks of that decision, their view seemed prudent in that moment given the unfavorable circumstances they faced.

It could have gone differently had one union been willing to stand with PATCO. Airline pilots did not have to formally strike. They only had to exercise their right to refuse to fly if they deemed the skies unsafe. Unfortunately, PATCO never built relations with the pilots prior to the strike that would have encouraged such solidarity. Instead, most pilots resented the controllers' walkout for triggering the furlough of thousands of their coworkers.

CREATIVITY REQUIRED

Repeating that lack of solidarity now would be a grave mistake. Labor must develop an effective strategy of collective action that gives workers a way to fight back.

The strategy might need to be nontraditional. Effective traditional strikes by federal workers — let alone the general strike that some are calling for — do not seem viable, especially in the short term. A federal workers' walkout might only speed the firing of its participants by an administration bent on shrinking the federal workforce by any means necessary.

Yet other forms of civil disobedience might be devised that could elicit broad popular support. For some workers, maybe it looks like demanding to work, resisting being kicked out of their workplaces, or publicly carrying on their work in an alternative

setting. Or maybe it looks like sit-ins and disruptive protests that take the fight to the people holding the levers of power. What if protestors began to risk mass arrests at Tesla dealerships or congressional district offices or set up "Muskvilles" that occupy federal properties?

Whatever strategy emerges, devising it must be the work of all union members, not only the elected leaders. The readers of **Labor Notes** and participants in the vibrant Federal Unionists Network are well positioned to work out strategies experimentally on the local level.

However it emerges, there must be an action strategy. Labor simply can't afford a defeat that will dwarf PATCO by comparison.

*Joseph McCartin is the author of **Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America** and president of the Labor and Working-Class History Association.*

Labor Temple demolition continues



The Peoria Labor Temple, that housed labor for almost 100 years, is being demolished to make way for a veterans homeless shelter. The contractor on the project is River City Demolition.



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Governor Pritzker zaps LaHood at Peoria Medicare event

by Mike Matejka

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker stood firm for funding Medicare and Medicaid in Peoria on March 21, joining advocates who spoke for these vital programs during the Care Can't Wait campaign.

An empty chair was at the table for Illinois 16th Congressional District representative Darin LaHood, who did not appear. That morning WC-BU-FM played an interview with LaHood, where he said "No one has talked about cutting Social Security. The president said just the opposite, that he's not going to cut Social Security or Medicare," LaHood asserted.

With the recently passed federal spending bill, which calls for cutting federal domestic spending by \$13 billion, Governor Pritzker wondered how that was possible without touching Social Security or Medicare. Pritzker said this about LaHood: "When his colleagues vote to take funding away from Medicaid, What will he say then?" He called for the Republican to "Stand up for Medicaid – have you heard him stand up for Medicaid?" Pritzker said that the Republican Congress might preserve Medicaid, but could cut the Affordable Care Act, which the Governor said covers 800,000 Illinois residents. "His unwillingness to show up here tells the story," Pritzker concluded. "We should be expanding health care, not cutting," he said earlier.

"Illinois is doing all we can to bolster access to healthcare –expanding access and simplifying enrollment, investing in healthcare infrastructure, erasing hundreds of millions of dollars in medical debt, and taking on predatory practices in the insurance and pharmaceutical industries," said Pritzker. "From day one, Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and Congressional Republicans – in their crusade to give massive tax cuts to the wealthy – have put working Illinoisans' healthcare on the chopping block."

Pritzker was touring the state, showing how federal budget cuts could impact Illi-

nois residents. On the panel with him was Ai-Jenn Poo, Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance; Service

Employee International Union (SIEU) home care workers Antonia Cotton and Jessica Bolmer; Kim Cornwell and Liz Montes from Peoria EPIC (Empowering People, Inspiring Capabilities) and John Porter and Carole Rosen from The ARC of Illinois (which works with people with developmental disabilities).

Ai-Jenn said "there is a growing chorus in this state and all over this nation who are speaking with one voice. 80 million of us depend on Medicaid. We

are fighting to protect it. Our lives depend on it."

Bolmer shared the low pay that home health care workers receive limited her survival. She reported she was living in her car and working two jobs, unable to afford both

health care and rent. "It wasn't until Medicaid that I could have a roof over my head," she said.

Cotton is currently retired from home health care work. She said that Medicaid "made it possible for me to take care of my needs. Medicaid paid for the medicines I needed to stay alive. ...I am here today because of Medicaid. God put us here to be here for others. It's a lesson you shouldn't have to take to the grownups in Congress."

Pritzker's state tour included many other locations. Earlier on March 21 he was in Rockford to support continued infrastructure funding. On March 19 he was in Urbana with Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski to highlight the impact cuts in food programs will have on Illinois farmers and food banks. The next day he was in Romeoville with Congresswoman Lauren Underwood to address potential Social Security cuts.

"Through economic recessions, global conflict, and political upheaval, Social Security has remained the bedrock of our economy, our social safety net, and our democracy," he said at the Romeoville event. "Donald Trump and Elon Musk's dangerous plan to gut the Social Security Administration will cause longer wait times for those looking for assistance with their benefits, improper denial of claims, and delayed or missed benefits checks. Here in Illinois, we're standing up for Social Security, because it's absolutely essential for our people to live independent, healthy, and fulfilling lives."



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