Appendix I

A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE PATCO STRATEGY

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The destruction of PATCO has been written off by most labor leaders as the inevitable result of an ill-conceived challenge to an anti-union U.S. President. Although there is widespread sympathy for the rank and file members who lost their jobs in an attempt to exercise collective bargaining rights in the best tradition of the U.S. labor movement, there is at the same time much disdain for the actions of the national officers of PATCO, most notably President Bob Poli. Although the criticisms of the officers are at least partially valid, it is important to recognize that the strategic miscalculations they made were by no means unique. It is even more important to give PATCO's leaders and members credit for the implementation of a brilliantly conceived internal organizing campaign.

Critics of PATCO conveniently forget that it was a small union by AFL-CIO standards, with only 15,000 members. Furthermore, the membership was scattered across the country in some 400 different facilities. Although the regional flight control centers typically employed 200 to 400 air traffic controllers, the majority of PATCO members worked in airport towers and belonged to small locals. Under the circumstances, preparing for a possible strike was a logistical nightmare. The legal prohibition of job actions by federal employees made the task all the most difficult. PATCO's ability to stage a strike which was supported by 75 percent of its members even after President Reagan's firing deadline had passed was a truly remarkable feat. Unfortunately the internal organizing consumed virtually all of the attention of the

national officers, and the strike was lost because of flaws in other aspects of the union's strategy.

PATCO's failure can be directly traced to the fact that its unsuccessful external relations were poor, and political activities were misguided. Another crucial weakness was a lack of understanding of economic factors, which led PATCO to overestimate its own strength. Because of the high visibility of the strike, these mistakes were magnified to such a degree that PATCO's officials were widely criticized (even within the labor movement) as bullheaded, inept, misguided, foolhardy, and worse.

Because the flaws in PATCO's strategy are not unique, it would be a mistake to ignore the experiences of this feisty little union. In the discussion that follows, the various aspects of PATCO's approach are considered with particular attention to the specific lessons which can be drawn from the experience. The most important and least discussed contribution of PATCO was its internal organizing program. After reviewing the implementation of this most positive part of the PATCO game plan, the discussion will turn to the components which were not handled as effectively.

I. Building Internal Solidarity[1]

In 1978 negotiations with the FAA, the only major improvement won by PATCO was overseas familiarization flights, essentially free trips abroad for members of the union. When the FAA failed to implement this plan because international airlines refused to honor the agreement, PATCO staged a series of largely unsuccessful slowdowns. Out of this experience came pressure from a group of rank and file militants to initiate changes within the union.

In order to assure that future job actions would be supported by the membership, a committee was appointed in the fall of 1978 to begin preparations for 1981 when the next contract would be negotiated. The "81 Committee" had seven members, one appointed by each of the union's seven regional vice presidents. The members of the 81 Committee, known within PATCO as "choirboys," were chosen for their leadership skills, popularity with the rank and file, and willingness to commit 3 years to the nitty-gritty task of organizing within the union in preparation for a possible strike.

The 81 Committee developed a strike contingency plan and explained it at regional meetings. Under the plan the union was organized geographically into 73 "clusters," with 1 to 12 locals per cluster. The idea behind this structure was to group smaller locals together with larger ones to reduce the feeling and reality of isolation. The 81 Committee selected a choirboy for each cluster to implement the strike plan locally. Eventually additional choirboys were selected so that there would be at least one at each facility, or over 400 nationally. All choirboys fit the same basic mold—they were organizers first

and foremost, popular with the rank and file, and committed to strike if necessary.

The 81 Committee instructed the choirboy in charge of strike preparation at each cluster to organize seven committees: communications, security, picketing, motivation, headquarters, good and welfare, and solidarity. In the smaller clusters every union member was assigned to a committee. In the larger clusters committee membership was often voluntary, but the broadest possible participation was encouraged. The cluster choirboy selected leaders for each committee, chosing individuals with skills appropriate to the committee's tasks, but with a commitment to strike if necessary as prerequisite.

Although the 81 Committee did not specify the duties of the seven committees in detail, and as a result a fair amount of variability developed from one location to another, the general assignments were as follows:

(1) communications—responsible for establishing a communication network locally (essentially a telephone tree), including an elaborate callback system for disseminating secret information;

(2) security—responsible for protecting strike headquarters from unwelcome visitors, keeping track of strikebreakers, and hiding the local president and choirboy in case arrest warrants were issued;

(3) picketing—responsible for setting up periodic informational picketing prior to the strike, and staffing picket lines during the strike;

(4) motivation—responsible for building support for the strike, and maintaining morale during the strike;

(5) headquarters—responsible for locating an appropriate strike headquarters, arranging for necessary supplies, and staffing the headquarters;

(6) good and welfare—responsible for helping members and their families survive during the strike, especially by directing them to government agencies (food stamps, etc.) and charitable organizations;

(7) solidarity—responsible for arranging social events for members and their families before and during the strike.

In addition to the seven required committees, each cluster choirboy was free to establish additional committees. The most common addition was a spouses committee which helped build family support for the strike, and of-

ten assisted other committees once the strike began. Some clusters also had a formal public relations committee and/or a political action committee. A final ingredient to the strike preparation plan was added by the 81 Committee as the strike deadline approached. In order to solidify the organizational structure and improve communication, the cluster choirboy selected an informed member from each work crew as an official contact. In some clusters these individuals were also referred to as choirboys.

More important than the details of the committee structure or the duties of the specific committees was the opportunity provided by this system for rank and file members to get involved in strike preparations. The committee system in a sense democratized PATCO—there was extensive delegation of authority, and a noticeable increase in membership involvement in the union throughout the country. The spiritual effect of this change was captured in the June 1981 issue of *High Cotton,* the newsletter of the Memphis cluster: "The decision to strike . . . will not be made by a few powerful union officials in back rooms with under the table deals, nor was the Choirboy Program itself developed in that manner; but by us . . . the individual professional air traffic controllers of the United States. We are the people who work the boards and we are the ones who know best what we want and how to achieve it."

The committee system was implemented in most clusters during 1980, although a few did not get organized until early 1981. In addition to committee meetings (often weekly, and more frequent as the strike approached) there were monthly local meetings and quarterly cluster meetings. As the committee system built momentum, attendance at local and cluster meetings increased dramatically. During the summer of 1981 there was a local or cluster meeting every week, and attendance approached 100 percent of those not on duty.

Another key component of the 81 Committee's plan was a requirement that 80 percent of all full performance air traffic controllers, or approximately 90 percent of PATCO members, vote in favor of a strike. The feeling was that a strike could only succeed with near unanimous participation by PATCO members. With this 80 percent rule built into the plan, cluster choirboys established detailed monitoring systems so that they could accurately gauge the level of strike support. Members whose willingness to strike was suspect were given special attention, with a careful attempt to motivate rather than intimidate recalcitrant individuals. For example, black controllers in many clusters were only marginally involved in strike preparations. Visits by members of PATCO's national Black Caucus often won their support. In other cases older controllers near retirement who were PATCO activists talked with their contemporaries who were reluctant to support a strike. In addition to this one-on-one organizing, teams of PATCO members from highly organized clusters would visit clusters that had been less successful to offer advice and give pep talks to the membership.

Although the degree of organization and level of participation in the committee system varied from one area to another, the very existence of the committees assured high visibility for strike preparation and offered every member a chance to contribute. Most PATCO members took advantage of the opportunity, and spent much of their own time involved in union activities during the spring and summer of 1981. It was this high degree of internal organization that enabled the 81 Committee and the national officers to hold the union together in the face of President Reagan's firing ultimatum. Clearly the extensive internal preparation was highly successful. Other unions should take note of the methods used and do more to involve their members in union affairs.

The only weakness in the 81 Committee's strategy was the exclusive focus of the cluster committees on *strike* preparation. The tight internal cohesiveness became so powerful that it developed a momentum of its own, making a strike almost inevitable. Had the same system been used to prepare for other aspects of the 1981 negotiations, particularly public relations and coordination with other unions, the chances of success would have been increased.

II. External Activities

A. Coordination with Other Unions. Although the 81 Committee advised locals to get involved in state labor councils, there was no formal system installed to assure that this happened. Some locals did establish links with other unions in their areas, but most paid far more attention to internal strike preparation. Indeed, if the locals took the activities of the national office as an example to emulate, little or no contact would have occurred. PATCO decided to wage its illegal strike with no prior official contact with the AFL-CIO or individual unions who would be affected by the strike.

Communication with other public sector unions would have given PATCO leaders informed feedback on their planned course of action. This would have been especially useful given the general lack of experience of PATCO's national officials and the small professional staff of the union. Equally important, the larger public sector unions have extensive political influence which they could have used in PATCO's behalf.

The failure of PATCO to communicate with airline industry unions was primarily an act of poor courtesy. Had the strike succeeded, thousands of union members could have been out of work for its duration. As it was, the reduced flight schedules which were imposed when the strike began gave the airlines an excuse to demand wage and work rule concessions from their employees' unions.

All unions can benefit from cooperating with other labor organizations. For public sector unions such solidarity is crucial because of the strict limitations placed on their activities by federal and state public sector bargaining

laws. With their own power severely constrained by legal restrictions on strikes, public sector unions should coordinate their activities closely with other unions to increase their leverage and bargaining power.

On a positive note, an important improvement in AFL-CIO policy was implemented as a direct result of the PATCO experience. The Public Employee Department now requires advance notification 15 days prior to any probable strike by a federal, state, or local affiliate. The rationale for notification is to improve the "quality and effectiveness" of "the support affiliated unions can give to and receive from each other during crisis situations."[2]

B. Public Relations. To the general public, the PATCO strike seemed to be an example of another greedy union throwing its weight around without regard for who was hurt by its actions. The lack of sympathy for the strike stemmed in large part from the widely publicized PATCO demands, which certainly appeared to be excessive: a $10,000 annual pay raise (increasing the average salary to $40,000), a 32-hour work week, and full retirement after 20 years on the job. Although this package might have been appropriate in the context of the posturing which accompanies contract negotiations, the demands were extreme based on the work experiences of the average citizen. PATCO could have avoided a total public relations disaster simply by moderating its demands and focusing more attention on nonwage aspects of the dispute.

PATCO had at its disposal ample ammunition for an effective public relations campaign. Of particular relevance were the reports of two groups of outside consultants hired by the FAA to investigate labor-management relations, worker attitudes, job stress, and worker health in the air traffic control system. Both reports were openly critical of management practices. The 1970 Corson Report could have been used in conjunction with the 1978 Rose Report to demonstrate the persistence over time of management's inflexibility and insensitivity. The two reports were potentially valuable to PATCO because they provided objective evidence that the air traffic controllers had legitimate complaints with management, and legitimate concerns with health related issues such as stress and burnout.[3] In particular, this information could have been presented to the public to make an excellent case for a reduced work week and an improved retirement system.

Although most unions could benefit from more attention to public relations, this is an especially important issue for public sector unions. Because their members directly serve the public, and because government decision makers must ultimately answer to the electorate, it is crucial that popular support be aggressively pursued. PATCO had a good case, but by waiting until after the strike began before going to the public it allowed the Reagan Administration to set the framework of the debate. In fact, by reiterating its initial extreme bargaining demands when announcing the strike deadline,

PATCO played right into the Administration's hands. As Bog Poli later admitted, "Our own public relations efforts were about as successful as Qaddafi's."[4]

C. Political Action. To its credit, PATCO recognized the importance of pursuing an aggressive political program. Legislation was introduced on the union's behalf in the House of Representatives, a coordinated lobbying campaign was conducted, and an apparently sympathetic candidate for president was endorsed with much fanfare. Unfortunately, there were two flaws in this program, one of them fatal.

First, the legislation was unrealistic and gave the opposition ammunition to use against PATCO. The combination of huge increases in salaries, future pay raises well in excess of inflation, reduced hours of work, and improved retirement made the proposal extremely expensive. When the Congressional Budget Office placed a $13 billion pricetag on the bill its defeat was guaranteed and PATCO's image as just another greedy union began to form.

The second and fatal mistake was to trust the assurances given by Ronald Reagan in return for PATCO's support of his candidacy. The endorsement followed a private meeting between Poli and Reagan and a subsequent letter from the candidate promising to "work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the President and the air traffic controllers."[5] This campaign pledge was accepted at face value with no apparent consideration given to the candidate's anti-union reputation. After taking office, Reagan reiterated his commitment to PATCO in a private February meeting with Poli, expressing sympathy for the air traffic controllers' desire for a reduced work week and improved retirement system.[6]

While Poli was being charmed by the "great communicator," the real Reagan strategy was quietly taking shape. In February 1981, the Department of Transportation hired Morgan, Lewis, and Bockius to handle the expected "volatile contract negotiations" with PATCO. This anti-union law firm, well known to the readers of the AFL-CIO *Report on Union Busters*, was eventually paid $376,000 for services directly related to the PATCO negotiations and strike.[7] In March, J. Lynn Helms was appointed FAA Administrator. While President of Piper Aircraft, Helms had personally coordinated campaigns to defeat union organizing drives in new plants, and to weaken locals in existing plants.[8]

During the summer another ingredient was added to the Administration's strategy. An original strike contingency plan developed by the Carter administration was discarded because it was too restrictive. It was secretly revised to allow for much higher levels of air traffic (approaching 75 percent of normal), more flexibility in scheduling, and more discretion for individual airlines regarding which flights to cancel. Airline representatives were involved in the planning process, and the FAA was assured of their cooperation

in advance of the strike.[9] The final ingredient was added to the formula when Reagan issued his firing ultimatum with a 48-hour time limit. Subsequently, 3500 members of the union elected to cross picket lines and return to work, assuring the success of the strike contingency plan and the destruction of PATCO.

It is especially important that public sector unions recognize that their struggles may be won or lost in the political arena. The PATCO experience makes clear just how difficult it is to implement an effective political action program. Poli's apparent coup in gaining Reagan's assurance of cooperation eventually boomeranged. As should be obvious from what happened in this case, politicians who form an alliance based on the pragmatic goals of an election campaign are less reliable than politicians whose personal views are consistent with the interests of the labor movement. Furthermore, unions must be alert to the reality that the politician will become part of management once in office, and will inevitably view public employee unions differently than during the election campaign.

D. Understanding Economic Factors. PATCO's leaders expected the strike to cause serious economic problems for the airline industry. If it had, there is little doubt that the airline companies would have pressured the Reagan Administration to settle the dispute. There were two reasons for the lack of significant economic impact. One was the revised strike response plan implemented by the Reagan Administration as discussed above. However, even this revised plan called for a 25 percent reduction in scheduled flights for an extended period of time. Such a major decline in business would normally be expected to be painful for any industry. But the airline companies were not operating in a "normal" environment in 1981.

The industry had been struggling ever since the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978. Increased competition had resulted in more flights, lower fares, and more empty seats. As a result, the industry lost a total of $200 million in the first half of 1981 alone.[10] Under the reduced mode dictated by the strike, the Airline Deregulation Act was essentially scrapped. The airlines were assigned quotas, but with significant flexibility to decide which flights got eliminated. The choice was obvious—nonprofitable routes were cancelled first. This enabled airlines to take inefficient aircraft out of service, save on fuel, lay off employees, win concessions from unions, and increase the all-important passenger load factor (the percent of seats occupied). Also, with fewer flights available there was less competition for passengers, allowing the elimination of discount rates. The major airline companies, then, stood to reap economic gains in the long run if the PATCO strike was not resolved. And the beauty of it from their standpoint was that the higher fares, reduced flights, and layoffs could all be blamed on PATCO.

PATCO's leaders had *assumed* that the strike would have a significant

economic impact. Any careful analysis of the economic conditions prevailing in the airline industry would have cast immediate doubt on that assumption. The lesson here is that unions must be willing to conduct appropriate analysis before planning a strike. After all, strikes are primarily economic actions. They are seldom effective except in an environment where the economic impact is likely to be significant.

III. Reflections on the Strengths and Weaknesses of the PATCO Strategy

The leaders and members of PATCO deserve the highest praise for their internal organization. In spite of the geographic dispersion of the membership, an unprecedented degree of internal solidarity was cultivated by delegating authority and facilitating rank and file involvement. Every member had the opportunity to contribute, and most rose to the challenge. The AFL-CIO has recently encouraged affiliated unions "to provide additional opportunities for members to participate in union affairs."[11] Unions which take this charge seriously would benefit considerably from a careful review of the PATCO model.

Unfortunately, the brilliance of the internal strategy was not matched in the union's external activities. It is incumbent upon union leaders objectively to evaluate the economic and political environment, and to offer an accurate assessment to the rank and file. Leaders should also coordinate with reliable allies to maximize potential strength, and communicate the union's just concerns, grievances, and demands to the general public. In virtually every facet of its external affairs, the PATCO strategy was lacking.

In the final analysis, however, most of the criticism of the 1981 strike is misdirected. PATCO represented the ultimate in union democracy, and its actions accurately reflected the frustrations of the rank and file. Strategic errors were committed, but the air traffic controllers had legitimate gripes which were ignored by the Reagan administration. The goverment's hard line, noncompromising approach was unwarranted. The President challenged the pride and guts of an organization built on pride and guts. In the end a good union was needlessly destroyed.