

women or rights for gays still hold considerable sway in much of the world even though they are, by any meaningful account, immoral. The conventions de Jasay shows most interest in—regarding property, contract, and other distributional questions—may, without the meddling of the state, track well with “freedom” because conventions in those areas lean in the direction of efficiency and property rights and free markets are much more efficient than the alternatives.

But that can’t be enough. There must be some way to challenge abhorrent conventions from *outside* convention. There must be some way to say, “This convention is *wrong*” and be *right* in saying so. That it’s not easy to prove, once and for all, the content of true moral rules doesn’t mean, as de Jasay counsels, we must abandon the quest.

*Political Philosophy, Clearly* is rich and wide-ranging. Its author deftly addresses the impossibility of the “bounded state,” the problem of “rights” talk, the obviousness of the presumption of liberty, and the ways an anarchist system can provide public goods. The short collection evinces a scholar with much of considerable value to say on many topics.

Unfortunately, Anthony de Jasay appears at the end of his career. In an interview last year in *The Independent Review*, de Jasay told Aschwin de Wolf, “I have now pretty well stopped writing . . . because my eyesight is almost completely gone, and I do not have the force and patience to overcome the handicap of being unable to read, to reread some part of a draft, and to read others’ work.” This is sad news indeed, for de Jasay has much to contribute to our understanding of the role and structure of the state, as *Political Philosophy, Clearly* amply demonstrates.

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### **Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America**

Joseph A. McCartin

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President Ronald Reagan’s firing of more than 12,000 illegally striking air traffic controllers in August 1981 is widely considered a defining moment both for Reagan’s presidency and for American

organized labor. For Reagan, it was the first of many lines in the sand he drew during his presidency. For organized labor, it marked an assault from an anti-union president determined to prevail against a Democratic constituency.

The reality, however, was more complicated than those competing narratives, as Georgetown University labor historian Joseph McCartin shows in his book *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers and the Strike that Changed America*. The conflict between the federal government and the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) dated back over a decade before Reagan became president. In effect, Reagan inherited the federal government's conflict-laden relationship with PATCO.

PATCO was not a typical public employee union. While hardly politically conservative, its early membership consisted largely of military veterans. For them, a career in air traffic control presented a unique opportunity to put the skills they had learned in the service to remunerative civilian use, thereby starting on a path to the middle class. They saw themselves as members of a skilled elite professional class.

Yet there was only one employer who could make use of their skills: the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). This monopsony meant FAA air traffic controllers had few options to address any grievances they might have.

Their efforts to expand such options merely pitted one centralized entity—the FAA—against another—PATCO. Like two planes on a collision course, two expressions of the 1960s—large public sector unions, represented by PATCO, and the conservative movement, represented by Reagan—were headed for a clash. In the end, the collision greatly damaged the unions.

That may seem hard to believe today. A majority of union members work for government entities and the public sector's share of overall union membership keeps growing. Yet that trend, which gained strength during the 1960s and 1970s, temporarily halted after the PATCO strike debacle. Today, around a third of public sector workers in the United States are unionized. Without the PATCO strike, McCartin notes, that share might be closer to half. Were that the case, the current fiscal troubles of many state and local governments would be even worse than they are.

The story of the rise and fall of PATCO is filled with surprising events and drama. On December 16, 1960, two planes collided over

New York, killing 134 people on board and on the ground. The disaster exposed flaws in the FAA's air control facilities and systems. However, the FAA representatives blamed pilot error and stuck to that story throughout the aftermath of the collision. News headlines reflected the FAA line, but the agency paid a price. "The FAA might have escaped blame in the eyes of the public," says McCartin, "but the approach to the investigation damaged its credibility among its own employees" (p. 25). The growing discontent among FAA controllers coincided with the very early days of public sector unionism. Even back then, some union leaders saw the public sector as key to the future of organized labor. Notes McCartin:

In the 1950s, unions were already beginning to worry about automation sapping their factory-based membership over the long run. Labor leaders were determined to establish a foothold in white-collar jobs. The best opportunity to do that seemed to be in government employment, where labor could exert its political influence to win changes in policy, and where employers were unlikely to resist unions as vigorously as private sector employers [p. 32].

Several attempts at organization proved ineffective. Then, in the late 1960s, a group of New York controllers, led by their colleagues Mike Rock and Jack Maher, "concluded that they would have to launch a national organization on their own," notes McCartin. "But they feared taking that step without the backing of someone prominent who could defend them if the FAA tried to threaten them" (p. 65). After calling several celebrity pilots, they struck gold with renowned trial lawyer F. Lee Bailey.

Bailey met with Maher, Rock and others on January 4, 1968, at a bar near LaGuardia airport. "As one round of drinks followed another, their stories poured out: outdated equipment; forced overtime; an unresponsive bureaucracy; insomnia; ulcers—all the things they felt were destined to shorten their lives" (p. 66). Bailey then suggested organizing a meeting of activist controllers from around the country. More than 700 controllers attended, and Bailey gave a rousing speech detailing controllers' issues with the FAA. Bailey asked his audience to put down \$10 each as their initial dues, marking the launch of PATCO. Bailey would be their lawyer.

Later that year, PATCO launched a work slowdown, whereby it pressured the FAA to grant it dues checkoff. Controllers could not strike, but they could slow down traffic by sticking to the letter of FAA rules. The slowdown worsened relations with the FAA and angered travelers. This conflict fed union militancy, which continuously ran up against government budget constraints.

Enter Ronald Reagan. Six months into his first term, PATCO's contract expired. Reagan did not come into the White House determined to make war on unions. In fact, he sought and received the endorsement of several socially conservative unions, including the Teamsters and PATCO. The Reagan campaign, eager to attract voters later called "Reagan Democrats," courted PATCO. Reagan was a former union president—he once headed the Screen Actors Guild—and, as governor of California, he signed a law that opened the door for local governments to collectively bargain with unions representing their employees.

PATCO, which had endorsed Richard Nixon's 1972 reelection campaign, had reached an impasse with the Carter administration. The union "endorsed Reagan in the belief that his election provided the only plausible scenario for gaining an acceptable contract without a strike in 1981" (p. 249). However, an unexpected change in PATCO's leadership dashed those hopes. In early 1980, PATCO Vice President Robert Poli successfully challenged John Leyden, who had been the union's president since 1970, for the top job. This internal coup turned out to be surprisingly significant. Poli pushed the government harder for more and more concessions, in the hope that Reagan would accede rather than see the nation's air traffic shut down. Poli's gambit might have worked, if not for the strike.

That year, controllers at Chicago's O'Hare airport staged a slowdown on their own to protest their workload. To avoid having any more facilities go off on their own, Poli drew up a set of contract demands that he believed most PATCO members would get behind. It included an immediate \$10,000 pay raise for all controllers, a 10 percent increase after one year, a cost-of-living adjustment of 1.5 percent for every percentage point increase in the consumer price index, a 30 percent bonus for time spent on on-the-job training, and a four-day workweek with three consecutive days off.

Hoping to avert an air traffic shutdown, Reagan gave his negotiators relatively wide latitude. Transportation Secretary Andrew “Drew” Lewis presented PATCO with an generous offer. “Never before had the government offered so much in a negotiation with a federal employees’ union,” notes McCartin (p. 262). Had PATCO taken this offer, it would have won. So what happened? PATCO’s leadership sold the deal badly to members, many of whom contrasted it to the union’s original outlandish demands. Momentum in favor of a strike had been building up among PATCO members.

Reagan drew the line at an illegal strike. Even worse for PATCO, other union leaders were stunned by strike. They thought it reckless. Other unions publicly stated their support for the striking controllers but did little else. The FAA had prepared well for the strike: supervisors, military controllers, and new hires handled reduced traffic. The airlines agreed to reducing traffic in exchange for a delay in airline deregulation. The strike put deregulation on hold, giving the airlines a respite from intense competition and more time to plan for the post-deregulation era.

Reagan took to the television and gave strikers 48 hours to return to their jobs or be fired. While Reagan’s speech galvanized the strikers at first, McCartin notes, “Beneath the veneer of bravado, there was considerable worry among many strikers. They understood the significance of the fact that Reagan himself, rather than one of his cabinet officers, delivered the ultimatum” (p. 295).

McCartin’s history is a detailed, straightforward, and at times gripping account of the rise and fall of PATCO and its interplay with other forces in the American polity. While McCartin’s sympathies appear to lie with the unions, he hews closely to the facts. However, he restates some union claims rather uncritically, such as the description of President John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10988 as being riddled with “defects” because it was not entirely to union leaders’ satisfaction.

Policy preferences notwithstanding, McCartin’s conclusion offers a postmortem on the PATCO strike and its aftermath in the context of labor policy today, including state-level fights over collective bargaining. In the end, the PATCO strike only slowed the advance of public employee unions, who have moved from strikes to electoral politics, thereby completing their transformation into a permanent lobby for bigger government.

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