



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your

colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for

samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

August 2, 2011

The Strike That Busted Unions

By JOSEPH A. McCARTIN

Washington

THIRTY years ago today, when he threatened to fire nearly 13,000 air traffic controllers unless they called off an illegal strike, Ronald Reagan not only transformed his presidency, but also shaped the world of the modern workplace.

More than any other labor dispute of the past three decades, Reagan's confrontation with the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, or Patco, undermined the bargaining power of American workers and their labor unions. It also polarized our politics in ways that prevent us from addressing the root of our economic troubles: the continuing stagnation of incomes despite rising corporate profits and worker productivity.

By firing those who refused to heed his warning, and breaking their union, Reagan took a considerable risk. Even his closest advisers worried that a major air disaster might result from the wholesale replacement of striking controllers. Air travel was significantly curtailed, and it took several years and billions of dollars (much more than Patco had demanded) to return the system to its pre-strike levels.

But the risk paid off for Reagan in the short run. He showed federal workers and Soviet leaders alike how tough he could be. Although there were 39 illegal work stoppages against the federal government

between 1962 and 1981, no significant federal job actions followed Reagan's firing of the Patco strikers. His forceful handling of the walkout, meanwhile, impressed the Soviets, strengthening his hand in the talks he later pursued with Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

Yet three decades later, with the economy shrinking or stagnant for nearly four years now and Reagan's party moving even further to the right than where he stood, the long-term costs of his destruction of the union loom ever larger. It is clear now that the fallout from the strike has hurt workers and distorted our politics in ways Reagan himself did not advocate.

Although a conservative, Reagan often argued that private sector workers' rights to organize were fundamental in a democracy. He not only made this point when supporting Lech Walesa's anti-Communist Solidarity movement in Poland; he also boasted of being the first president of the Screen Actors Guild to lead that union in a strike. Over time, however, his crushing of the controllers' walkout — which he believed was justified because federal workers were not allowed under the law to strike — has helped undermine the private-sector rights he once defended.

Workers in the private sector had used the strike as a tool of leverage in labor-management conflicts between World War II and 1981, repeatedly withholding their work to win fairer treatment from recalcitrant employers. But after Patco, that weapon was largely lost. Reagan's unprecedented dismissal of skilled strikers encouraged private employers to do likewise. Phelps Dodge and International Paper were among the companies that imitated Reagan by replacing strikers rather than negotiating with them. Many other employers followed suit.

By 2010, the number of workers participating in walkouts was less than 2 percent of what it had been when Reagan led the actors' strike in 1952. Lacking the leverage that strikes once provided, unions have been unable to pressure employers to increase wages as productivity rises. Inequality has ballooned to a level not seen since Reagan's boyhood in the 1920s.

Although he opposed government strikes, Reagan supported government workers' efforts to unionize and bargain collectively. As governor, he extended such rights in California. As president he was

prepared to do the same. Not only did he court and win Patco's endorsement during his 1980 campaign, he directed his negotiators to go beyond his legal authority to offer controllers a pay raise before their strike — the first time a president had ever offered so much to a federal employees' union.

But the impact of the Patco strike on Reagan's fellow Republicans has long since overshadowed his own professed beliefs regarding public sector unions. Over time the rightward-shifting Republican Party has come to view Reagan's mass firings not as a focused effort to stop one union from breaking the law — as Reagan portrayed it — but rather as a blow against public sector unionism itself.

In the spring, Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin invoked Reagan's handling of Patco as he prepared to “change history” by stripping public employees of collective bargaining rights in a party-line vote. “I'm not negotiating,” Mr. Walker said. By then the world had seemingly forgotten that unlike Mr. Walker, Reagan had not challenged public employees' right to bargain — only their right to strike.

With Mr. Walker's militant anti-union views now ascendant within the party of a onetime union leader, with workers less able to defend their interests in the workplace than at any time since the Depression, the long-term consequences continue to unfold in ways Reagan himself could not have predicted — producing outcomes for which he never advocated.

Joseph A. McCartin, an associate professor of history at Georgetown University, is the author of the forthcoming “Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America.”



More in Opinion (2 of 20 articles)

OPEN

Op-Ed Columnist: The New Hama Rules

[Read More »](#)