The day the middle class died, Part 3

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The election of 1980 fundamentally changed the U.S. political and economic landscape. Besides putting Ronald Reagan in the White House, voters gave Republicans control of the Senate. Additionally, while Republicans were still the minority in the House, they gained 34 seats which—along with their fiscally conservative "Boll Weevil" Southern Democrat allies—gave them enough leverage to enact Reagan's agenda of major tax cuts, reductions to social program, deregulation of industry and banking, and the rollback of environmental protections. This "Reagan Revolution" changed the course of the country from the New Deal/New Frontier/Great Society policies of Democratic presidents Roosevelt, Kennedy and Johnson, and commenced a rise of conservatism that would define American politics into the next century.

While Reagan had not specifically campaigned against unions and had himself been the president of the Screen Actors' Guild, most labor leaders were wary of his intentions and had supported Carter in the election. One of the three unions that had supported Reagan was the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCO); Reagan had assured them during the campaign that "my administration will work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the president and the air traffic controllers." Even as the newly elected president rolled back the enforcement of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards, opposed minimum wage increases, cut aid to state and local governments and made anti-labor appointments to head the National Labor Relations Board and the Office of Personnel Management, the leaders of PATCO believed that Reagan's campaign pledge to them would hold strong. Although controllers knew that they could be fired for going on strike, few thought Reagan would actually do it, given the crippling effect a strike would have on the airline industry and the economy. Reports that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and airline industry had spent the previous two years preparing contingency plans in the event the controllers walked out were dismissed as unrealistic.

As the controllers formed their picket lines on the morning of Aug. 3, 1981, Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis and FAA head Lynn Helms put their plans into action, cutting the number of flights by more than half while calling up supervisors, military controllers and previously trained replacements to staff the control rooms. Later that morning, Reagan announced in a Rose Garden speech, "I must tell those who failed to report for duty this morning that they are in violation of the law and if they do not report within 48 hours they have forfeited their jobs and will be terminated." But as controllers watched the televised speech in union halls and strike headquarters around the country, few believed that the system could operate with 80 percent of them out on strike—so instead of intimidating the workers, it strengthened their resolve.

Only about 10 percent of the controllers returned to work prior to the deadline, far less than the 40 to 50 percent predicted by FAA Chief Helms. Nevertheless, by the end of the week, the agency began mailing dismissal letters to the 13,000 workers still out. Public sentiment turned against the controllers, as the dispute was seen by many as pitting austerity-minded, law-enforcing public officials against union workers who were seen as well paid, taxpayer funded and unreasonably militant. Within a few weeks it was all over. The striking controllers were fired and banned from federal employment for life. PATCO was decertified as a union and although it took several years for the airline industry to return to its pre-strike levels, the union was eliminated.

More than any other labor dispute of the past four decades, Reagan's confrontation with PATCO undermined the bargaining power of American workers and their labor unions. 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. Further, it signaled to private-sector employers that strikes could be effectively fought and the tables turned on their unions. Prior to PATCO, it was not acceptable for employers to replace workers on strike, even though the law gave them the right to do so. The PATCO strike eased those inhibitions. As companies increasingly resorted to strikebreaking and permanent replacements in their conflicts with their unions, major strikes fell from an average of 300 each year in the decades before 1981 to fewer than 30 today.

Another of the strike's consequences was the rise of avowedly anti-union conservatives among Republican Party ranks, as support for Reagan's hard line became a litmus test of Republican loyalty. Today, with Reagan's party moving even further to the right than where he stood, the long-term costs of his destruction of PATCO loom ever larger. 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. Thirty years later, then-Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker invoked Reagan's handling of PATCO when he was able strip that state's public employees of collective-bargaining rights in a party-line vote in the state legislature. "I'm not negotiating," Walker said. By then the world had seemingly forgotten that, unlike Walker, Reagan had not challenged public employees' right to bargain—only their right to strike.

With 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.