

The day the middle class died



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It might seem foreign to many Americans today, but there once was a time when working people could raise a family and send the kids to college on just one parent's income. When anyone who wanted a decent paying job could get one. When people worked only five days a week, eight hours a day and had a paid vacation every summer. When many jobs were union jobs, from baggers at the grocery store to the guy painting your house, and this meant that no matter how "lowly"

your job was, you had guarantees of a pension, health insurance and someone to stick up for you if you were unfairly treated.

So, when did all this end? Many historians point to Aug. 5, 1981, as the beginning of the end of the American middle class. That was the day that President Ronald Reagan fired every member of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). To understand how this came about, we need to look back a few decades before that to see what caused this drastic change in American society.

Although trade unions had existed in America prior to the Revolutionary War, it wasn't until the national economy had been nearly destroyed and the country was plunged into the Great Depression that unions were finally legalized. In 1935, as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal recovery plan, a Democrat-controlled Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) guaranteeing the rights of private-sector employees to organize into unions (public employees, including letter carriers, did not gain this right until 1962.) The NLRA sought to correct the "inequity of bargaining power" between employers and employees by promoting collective bargaining between the employer and unions representing the workforce. It also created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to enforce the law. As a result, over the next 40 years the number of workers belonging to unions rose from 8 percent to nearly 33 percent, and wages and benefits rose steadily not just for union workers, but also for those in non-union jobs, as employers had to compete to attract and retain employees and to stave off organizing attempts.

The NLRA was bitterly opposed by conservatives, business groups and some members of the Republican Party who viewed it as a "threat to freedom" and engaged in a campaign of opposition to repeal these "socialist" efforts. This included encouraging employers to refuse to comply with the NLRB and supporting the filing of injunctions to keep it from functioning. This campaign continued until the NLRA was found constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1937. So rather than fight the NLRA directly, they began to

chip away at its protections at the national and state levels by seeking to outlaw union practices such as closed shops, secondary boycotts, jurisdictional strikes, mass picketing and strikes in violation of contractual no-strike clauses, as well as multi-employer (pattern) bargaining slowly whittling union membership levels down to about 20 percent in 1980.

So how does PATCO figure into all of this? Founded in 1968, PATCO was a relatively new union of air traffic controllers employed by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The 1960s had seen an explosion in passenger air travel, and controllers were struggling to keep the skies safe. Controllers, like letter carriers, were forbidden by law to strike, so after forming PATCO in 1968, they staged sickouts at key locations, causing widespread flight delays and cancellations while drawing attention to the crisis. As a result, Congress accelerated the installation of automated systems, began hiring air traffic controllers at an increasing rate and raised salaries to help attract and retain controllers.

While this helped for a time, the passage of the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 lifted restrictions on fares and access to routes. Airlines could now fly where they wanted and set their own prices. Dozens of new low-cost airlines were soon filling the airports with passengers and skies with even more traffic. Controllers found their highly demanding jobs increasingly stressful. Meanwhile, controllers, 80 percent of whom were Vietnam war veterans, found their highly demanding and stressful jobs taking a toll on their health and personal lives. Only 11 percent of controllers lasted to retirement age, despite being eligible after 20 years of service. More than half the workers who left the job did so for medical reasons, and their efforts to find relief were ignored by FAA chief Langhorn Bond, an appointee of President Jimmy Carter.

Frustrated, PATCO refused to back President Carter in the 1980 election, instead endorsing GOP candidate Ronald Reagan. During the campaign, PATCO asked both Carter and Reagan to promise to fire Bond and improve control tower equipment. Carter stood by his appointee, but Reagan was quick to agree, and in a letter to PATCO President Robert Poli, wrote:

You can rest assured that if I am elected president, I will take whatever steps are necessary to provide our air traffic controllers with the most modern equipment available and to adjust staff levels and work days so that they are commensurate with achieving a maximum degree of public safety... I pledge to you that my administration will work very closely with you to bring about a spirit of cooperation between the president and the air traffic controllers.

In next month's article, I will discuss how less than a year later, Reagan reneged on his promise, destroyed PATCO, and the dismantling of the American middle class began.