

Reagan fires 11,000 striking air traffic controllers Aug. 5, 1981

By [ANDREW GLASS](#)

On this day in 1981, President Ronald Reagan fired more than 11,000 air traffic controllers who ignored his order to return to work. The sweeping mass firing of federal employees slowed commercial air travel, but it did not cripple the system as the strikers had forecast.

Two days earlier, nearly 13,000 controllers walked out after talks with the Federal Aviation Administration collapsed. As a result, some 7,000 flights across the country were canceled on that day at the peak of the summer travel season.

Robert Poli, president of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, sought an across-the-board annual wage increase of \$10,000 for the controllers, whose pay ranged from \$20,462 to \$49,229 per year. He also sought a reduction of their five-day, 40-hour workweek to a four-day, 32-hour workweek. The FAA made a \$40 million counteroffer, far short of the \$770 million package that the union sought.

Reagan branded the strike illegal. He threatened to fire any controller who failed to return to work within 48 hours. Federal judges levied fines of \$1 million per day against the union.

In 1955, Congress made such strikes punishable by fines or a one-year jail term — a law the Supreme Court upheld in 1971.

To the chagrin of the strikers, the FAA's contingency plans worked. Some 3,000 supervisors joined 2,000 nonstriking controllers and 900 military controllers in manning airport towers. Before long, about 80 percent of flights were operating normally. Air freight remained virtually unaffected.

In carrying out his threat, Reagan also imposed a lifetime ban on rehiring the strikers. In October 1981, the Federal Labor Relations Authority decertified PATCO.