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

By Joseph A. McCartin

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In August 1981, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) called an illegal strike. The new president, Ronald Reagan, fired the strikers, establishing a reputation for both decisiveness and hostility to organized labor. As Joseph A. McCartin writes, the strike was the culmination of two decades of escalating conflict between controllers and the government that stemmed from the high-pressure nature of the job and the controllers' inability to negotiate with their employer over vital issues. PATCO's fall not only ushered in a long period of labor decline; it also served as a harbinger of the campaign against public sector unions that now roils American politics.

Now available in paperback, *Collision Course* sets the strike within a vivid panorama of the rise of the world's busiest air-traffic control system. It begins with an arresting account of the 1960 midair collision over New York that cost 134 lives and exposed the weaknesses of an overburdened system. Through the stories of controllers like Mike Rock and Jack Maher, who were galvanized into action by that disaster and went on to found PATCO, it describes the efforts of those who sought to make the airways safer and fought to win a secure place in the American middle class. It climaxes with the story of Reagan and the controllers, who surprisingly endorsed the Republican on the promise that he would address their grievances. That brief, fateful alliance triggered devastating miscalculations that changed America, forging patterns that still govern the nation's labor politics.

Written with an eye for detail and a grasp of the vast consequences of the PATCO conflict for both air travel and America's working class, *Collision Course* is a stunning achievement.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Simply one of the best-written labor histories I have ever read." -*Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*

"Mr. McCartin deals with policy but also with personalities, and the book is better for it. For anyone at all interested in labor or business history, I recommend it. " --*The New York Times*

"[C]onvincing...draws a vivid picture of a culture and how, as much as the realities an organization faces, that culture can determine the group's behavior." --*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"[McCartin] patiently lays out the full background and aftermath of the PATCO tragedy in *Collision Course*, an absorbing, detailed and shrewdly observed chronicle of the strike and PATCO's unlikely rise and fall." --*The Nation*

"The definitive account of the PATCO strike...*Collision Course's* treatment of worker and political power should help inform trade unions' strategies today, and perhaps prompt discussion of how to revitalize the greatest source of worker power: the strike." --*In These Times*

"The air traffic controllers' strike in August 1981 was a defining moment for the Reagan presidency and the American labor movement. By firing the air traffic controllers, and successfully replacing them, Reagan heralded the end of a political era when labor unions - and the workers they represented - were an integral part of the American social contract. Joseph McCartin tells the story in gripping detail. It's must reading for anyone interested in the recent history of American politics and labor relations." --John B. Judis, author of *The Folly of Empire*

"The signal event in the evisceration of the American middle class was Ronald Reagan's breaking the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981. In *Collision Course*, Joe McCartin brilliantly and compellingly tells this tragic tale, and situates it in the broader narrative of middle-class America's long and sickening decline." --Harold Meyerson, Editor-at-Large of *The American Prospect* and op-ed columnist for *The Washington Post*

"In an age of obscurantist academic historical writing, *Collision Course* stands out as a model of accessible and relevant scholarship." --*National Review*

"The Air Traffic Controllers strike of 1981 was one of the most important struggles in American history, and by breaking the union, Ronald Reagan dealt a blow to organized labor from which it has still not recovered. If you care about the labor movement, you need to read *Collision Course* and even if you don't, you'll be transfixed by the drama of McCartin's story-telling." --E.J. Dionne, syndicated columnist and author of *Why Americans Hate Politics*

"[a] wonderfully good book... In this admirable account of President Ronald Reagan's destruction of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981-1982, McCartin shows not merely where that destruction fits into a long narrative of the decline of organized labor in the United States but also how tensions between controllers and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) might have been resolved differently." --*Journal of American History*

"McCartin tells the story of PATCO before its inception to years after the conclusion of the strike, a fascinating story with many twists and turns." --*Contemporary Sociology*

About the Author

Joseph A. McCartin is Professor of History at Georgetown University and Director of the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor.

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