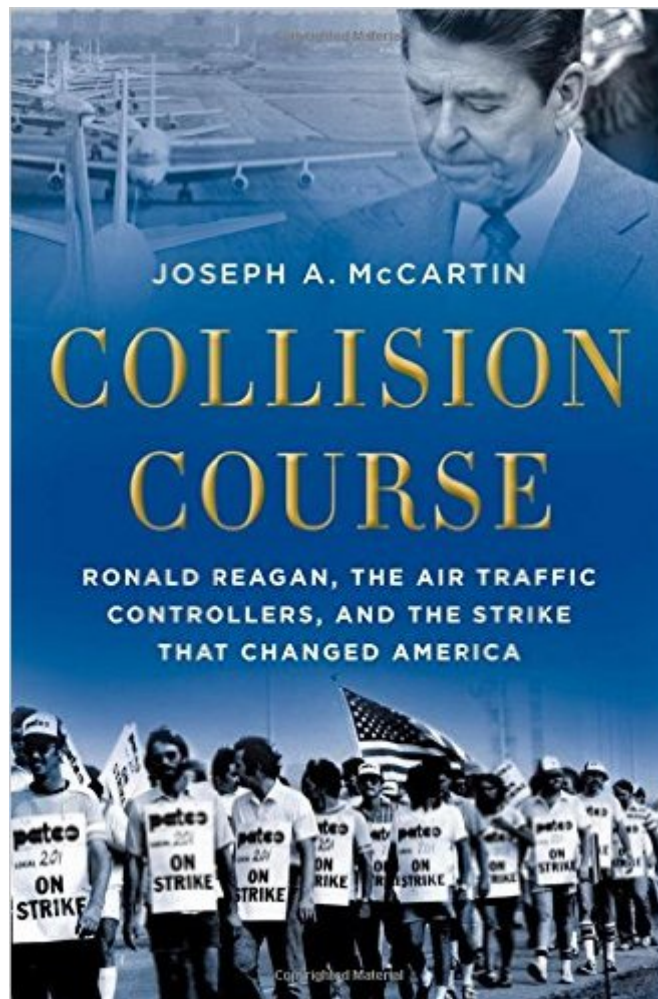


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# Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, The Air Traffic Controllers, And The Strike That Changed America



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anyone who remembers 1981 remembers the day the air traffic controllers went out on strike. President Reagan ordered them to report back to work within 48 hours or else. Those who didn't (only 10% of those striking returned to work) were fired. In *Collision Course*, labor historian Joseph McCartin has written an account of the formation of PATCO (the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization), the strike, and what happened after Reagan fired the controllers. *Collision Course* is no dull labor history. It's told almost like a thriller. McCartin refers early in the book to Arthur Hailey's novel *Airport*. I think he may have been inspired by Hailey to keep it punchy, because even though you know how the PATCO story ends, it's still quite exciting to read about the events leading up to the inevitable clash of union and employer. McCartin tells many sides to the story that I wasn't aware of at the time. Reagan's decision to act tough had just as much to do with foreign policy as it did with labor relations. He was dealing with the Soviets and needed to appear decisive and ruthless. McCartin also tells how the controller population was overwhelmingly male, white, and ex-military. The chapters on how the black controllers and the women controllers created ways to succeed despite the institutional prejudice they faced is actually quite inspiring. It's possible that the tendency for the white men of PATCO to see things from a narrow point of view was part of their downfall.

"*Collision Course*" by Joseph A. McCartin is an authoritative history of PATCO and its ill-fated confrontation with the Ronald Reagan administration. An associate professor of history at Georgetown University, Mr. McCartin's thorough research includes the review of thousands of news reports and documents as well as interviews with over one hundred people who participated in the event. The end result is an extraordinarily well-written book that brings new insight to a seminal event in late 20th century American labor relations and helps us understand why it remains relevant to us today. Mr. McCartin explains how an air disaster in 1960 compelled air traffic controllers to become more vocal about conditions at the FAA where overwork, stress and faulty equipment in the towers had pushed controllers to the limit. We learn how controllers Michael Rock and Jack Maher organized PATCO with the help of legendary trial lawyer F. Lee Bailey. Mr. McCartin takes us inside to witness the drama as the fledgling union struggled with the FAA through years of sick outs, rolling delays and other job actions that generally resulted in winning modest gains for workers while often testing the patience of pilots and the flying public. Mr. McCartin discusses how the junior controllers who joined the union in the 1970s were not as inclined as their seniors to accept the FAA's 'Theory X' style of dictatorial management. These so-called 'choirboys' found a champion in Robert Poli

who, as PATCO's new president, expressed a desire to confront the FAA to resolve long-festering problems in the workplace. Meanwhile, Mr.

Collision Course by Joseph McCartin provides an interesting look at the labor disputes of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) that led to the mass firing of Air Traffic Controllers during an illegal strike under Ronald Reagan's presidency. McCartin looks at the development of PATCO starting in the 1960's at its formation in what would become La Guardia. The author then tracks in very exacting detail the steps that formed PATCO and the efforts they undertook from sickouts to slowdowns to the preparations for an eventual strike against the oaths controllers signed the day they became controllers. This strike would become a monumental occasion marking one of the largest strikes in one of the most critical industries that had the potential to slide the American recession deeper and jeopardize hundreds if not thousands of lives. On the other side you have the incompetent management of the FAA that marginalized the requests of its workers and led to the build up of resentment that occurred during the 70's and into the 80's. McCartin does an excellent job of looking at the angles from labors perspective and how it fit into the social consciousness of the time and the social trends of air traffic controllers. After 250 pages of this analysis Ronald Reagan enters the picture facing a volatile labor situation. One area that McCartin downplays was not only the air traffic controllers striking at this time but a possible postal worker strike were fomenting around the same time as the controllers. This combination combined with the public posture of the PATCO leadership led to an inevitable conflict that resulted in Reagan (the only president to lead a union) to fire every controller who went on strike.

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