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Biographical Note

Herbert R. Northrup attained an A.B. from Duke University in 1939; an A.M. in 1941 and Ph D. in 1942 from Harvard University. Twenty years later, Northrup served as chairman director of the Department of Industry (now called Department of Management) at the Wharton School, Pennsylvania, from January 1964 until his retirement in July 1988. During Northrup’s tenure, the struggling group began to live up to its mandate as a resource for labor relations and personnel material. Under Northrup’s leadership, the school became the largest academic publisher of labor-management relationships and studies. Northrup himself published several research papers and books, ranging from a wide selection of topics including: “The Negro in the Air Transport industry” (1971); “Blacks and other Minority Participation in the All-volunteer Navy and Marine Corps” (1977); “Impact of OSHA on the Aero Space Industry” (1977); “Objective Selection of Supervisors” (1978); “The 12-Hour shift Revisited” (1988); “The Federal Government as Employer: The federal Labor Relations Authority and the PATCO Challenge” (1988); and “The ‘Helper’ Controversy in the Construction Industry” (1993).

As a professor emeritus at the Wharton School’s Department of Industry, Northrup still publishes. He resides in Haverford, Pennsylvania.

The material donated to the Reagan Library pertains to the 1981 PATCO Strike.

PATCO STRIKE SUMMARY

On August 3, 1981, members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization – the PATCO Union – began a historic strike. These federal employees cited their perceived poor pay and unsatisfactory compensation as their grievances. Specifically, these controllers felt that the Federal government should increase their benefits due to the stressful nature of their jobs and reprimand unsympathetic supervisors.

President Ronald Reagan’s response was swift: he fired all eleven thousand PATCO participants, but allowed a forty-eight hour grace period for the strikers to return to their positions without retribution. While some of the strikers heeded the president’s warning and went back to work, many did not and found themselves out of work. In his autobiography, An American Life, President Reagan explained that while he was sympathetic with the strikers – as he himself led the Screen Actors Guild for two terms in the 1950s – Reagan rejected the strikers’ demand for a “huge salary increase” that would cost the Federal government an additional $700 million per year.
In addition, Reagan argued that the strike itself was illegal, and if the PATCO union won, it would set a precedent that would open the Federal government to all sorts of demands from federal employees. Reagan quoted Franklin Roosevelt, who stated that workers who performed an essential government service could not act out against their employers, namely the people. In Reagan’s eyes, he had to “maintain the safety of the airways” from these workers who had abandoned their pledge not to strike against the government. The Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld the President’s and John Lewis’ (Secretary of the Department of Transportation) decision to fire all remaining strikers.

The PATCO strike had several long-lasting ramifications. Still relatively new to the Presidency, Reagan’s move was popular with the people; Reagan demonstrated that he was taking his role seriously and was, in his words, “not playing games.” The President’s handling of the PATCO strike further symbolized the decline of organized labor in the public’s perception. After the strike ended, all attempts to rebuild a PATCO-like union failed. Ironically, the Federal Aviation Administration’s subsequent investigation into the controversial conflict determined that many of the air traffic controllers had genuine grievances, leading the FAA to take steps to increase workers’ benefits and lessen stress.

**Scope and Content**

This collection is arranged into five series.

**SERIES I: STRIKE DOCUMENTS** (2 l.f.; Box 1-4)

This series consists of primary documents pertaining to the strike. Such sources include audio tapes, news clippings as the strike unfolded, and various PATCO papers and communiqués (newsletters, contracts) relevant to the strike. This series also contains PATCO’s failed appeal to the United States Supreme Court to uphold the strike.

**SERIES II: POST-PATCO STRIKE** (0.8 l.f.; Box 4-7)

This series consists of files documenting the aftermath of the PATCO strike. This series includes Congressional investigations, various air traffic controllers groups that attempted to succeed PATCO, and the post-strike environment for air traffic controllers. This series also contains an appeal to Federal Labor Authority to reinstate PATCO

**SERIES III: LEGALITIES AND INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS** (1.3 l.f.; Box 7-11)

This series consists of legal papers and cases where fired air traffic controllers attempted to force the federal government to rehire them. The material also includes various international responses to the PATCO strike and news clippings describing how the strike affected international air travel.

**SERIES IV: PATCO STRIKE AS HISTORY** (0.1 l.f.; Box 11-12)
This series consists of articles and scholarly perspectives concerning the PATCO strike approximately ten years after the event. This series also includes material focusing on the strike’s ten-year anniversary.

SERIES V: INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH UNIT STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS
(2 l.f.; Box 12-16)

This series consists of independent and Congressional studies concerning air traffic controllers. The material includes topics concerning international working conditions, labor/management relationships, and air traffic controller staffing. The documents also include several court depositions of PATCO leaders for their role in the strike.

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