

NATCA's John Carr: ATO 'Is a Complete, Total and Abject Failure'

New Round of Explosions in War of Words between FAA, NATCA

Aero-News.net | Fri, Dec 02, 2005

(Editor's Note: The following is the unedited text of a letter posted on a website associated with the Professional Airways Systems Specialists (PASS-MIDO), from National Air Traffic Controllers Organization president John Carr (file photo, top right) to the COO of the FAA's Air Traffic Organization, Russ Chew (file photo, bottom right).

(Although Chew was greeted warmly by the controllers union when he came onboard the then-new ATO in October 2003, now two years later Carr takes issue with many of the promises and assertions he maintains Chew has made since then, statements Carr maintains the ATO has failed to live up to. As one example, Carr cites Chew's 2004 statement that "our 2005 operating budget includes sufficient funds to support our target level of 15,333 controllers." At this time, says Carr, the FAA employs roughly 1,000 fewer air traffic controllers than that figure -- and the federal agency is claiming poverty.

(Aero-News has received confirmation from sources within the FAA that this letter is authentic.)

Mr. Russ Chew
Chief Operating Officer
FAA Air Traffic Organization
November 30, 2005

Dear Mr. Chew:

On October 18, 2003 the National Air Traffic Controllers Association welcomed the Air Traffic Organization with open arms, calling the initiative "bold and smart." On a personal note we invested in you a tremendous level of trust, calling you "innovative and thoughtful." We loudly proclaimed that your ascendance raised the curtain on a new dawn for the agency. We embraced your blueprint and publicly proclaimed that you gave us all a "once in a lifetime chance to make real and lasting change to the organization." We invested a great deal of our organizations' time, energy, effort and money in your embryonic little experiment. We gave you instant credibility with the workforce when you had none. We embraced your arrival as a shot in the arm, and we did everything in our power to enable, engender and insure your success.

The ATO promised to correct an overly complicated management structure. You called for union participation as a priority at every stage. You proposed a bottom-up structure that flattened the organization and focused on customer service. You proposed a leaner structure that empowered managers. You promised to staff the system. On these, and on virtually every other metric we can conceive of, the Air Traffic Organization has failed the system. More pointedly, the Air Traffic Organization is a complete, total and abject failure to the men and women we represent.

A few examples will illustrate my point. In a speech you gave on July 12, 2004, you said, "The key to our ability to operate and maintain the high levels of safety and efficiency that air travelers have come to expect is our highly skilled workforce. Our 2005 operating budget includes sufficient funds to support our target level of 15,333 controllers. Overall, about 83 percent of our operations budget directly

supports the delivery of air traffic services." And yet...you currently have almost 1,000 fewer controllers on board than that number. The system is straining at the seams, traffic is rapidly growing and operational errors are on the rise.

This constitutes a failure to the men and women we represent.

In a speech on February 24, 2004 you said, "We've flattened the organization to bring decision makers closer to the points of service delivery. The old organization included 19 high level organizational entities. The new organization has 10." Then on June 23, 2004 you said, "The old organization had 11 layers of management. The new one has 6." In reality, and as I've told you previously, your "new" organization has taken us from 7 layers of management to eight, 9 Regional Offices to 18 (nine terminal and nine center,) and perhaps most egregiously in a new customer focused, service delivery organization we have gone from a best-practices 9:1 controller-to-supervisor ratio to a bloated, bureaucratic, unwieldy 6:1 controller-to-supervisor ratio. Add this wasteful reality to your organization's inability to staff even to your own target levels and you have greater and greater numbers of managers watching fewer and fewer air traffic controllers working more and more aircraft. Hardly what we would characterize as "bold" or "smart."

On the subject of labor relations you have always maintained a hands-off managerial style. You may attribute that to hierarchy, politics or policy, but the net effect to the people we represent is harmful and deleterious in the extreme. On your watch the FAA/ATO has imposed one set of pay and work rules on an unwilling workforce, threatened another (NATCA,) stonewalled still a third (PASS,) walked away from a fourth (AFSCME,) and come in dead last in a non-partisan and rigorous survey of best places to work in the federal government.

In fact, the FAA is exceedingly lucky that the authors of that survey (The Partnership For Public Service and American University) quit ranking federal organizations and just tied the worst of the worst at 143rd. If they had continued to rank the lowest of the low the FAA/ATO would have plummeted like a sack of hammers, coming in 163rd in Family Friendly Culture, 165th in Training and Development, 182nd in Pay and Benefits, 197th in Effective Leadership and a mind-numbingly poor 203rd in Strategic Management. As you know, FAA Administrator Blakey wants us to be "data-driven," proclaiming loudly and often that "facts are stubborn things." Well, there are the facts. There is the data. And yes, it does indeed indicate some stubbornness.

In air traffic control facilities across the nation the ATO's failure to instill a fair labor relations culture has emboldened zealot managers to higher and higher levels of audacity. Threats, intimidation and fear have replaced a just culture in air traffic management, and intimidation and reprisal are the order of the day. On the ATO watch 12 families spent this Thanksgiving wondering where their next meal was coming from because you stood idly by as they were removed for an offense you personally know to be commonplace (even in the pilot community from which you come.) And what did the FAA/ATO do about it? They lied to Congress, briefing both House and Senate staff that they weren't really going to "fire" those controllers, the punishment was going to be mitigated down. Well, Russ, they're sure as hell fired now. While Bruce and Rick and the rest of "The Gang That Couldn't Fly Straight" might be proud of themselves we are not. In fact, we're disgusted.

Air traffic controllers now face discipline for operational errors, replacing a decades-old framework of accident prevention, learning and safety with one of distress, misgiving and uncertainty. If the horrors of September 11th were to happen today we are not certain that the system would be able to react because your management team has effectively chilled and terrorized the workforce to the point where

individuals are afraid to act independently for fear of losing their jobs. At the risk of sounding trite that's hardly what we'd call "innovative" or thoughtful."

The FAA and the ATO have broken numerous signed agreements with their employees, ranging from the liaison program to the payment of over \$20 million dollars in earned wages under an agreement struck with Administrator Blakey. Your team of Vice Presidents cannot even master the complicated art of first scheduling, and then actually attending, meetings with the union representing well over half of all of your employees. More complicated matters such as aviation safety awareness, PCS allocations, facility consolidation plans, nationwide bidding procedures or even your own projects, such as the GSDFs, are hopeless dreams, stuck in your newly created stove pipes. The ATO has managed a unique feat: It has replaced a bloated, crusty, stove-piped military-style hierarchy of bureaucracy with a shiny, brand-new bloated stove-piped military-style hierarchy of bureaucracy.

Your call for union participation as a priority was a joke, a hollow shell, a charade, a cruel hoax. I cannot think of one single, solitary thing that you personally or your leadership team organizationally have done in this regard. Not one single thing. Not a meeting, a letter, a decision, an action, a memo, a call or a Post-It note's worth of consideration has been given to the union's role in your organization's affairs---a role, I might add, that is granted by law and protected by statute. Our attempts to get a married air traffic controller couple moved to one of the most critically staffed facilities in the nation begat a blizzard of condescending emails from one of your Vice Presidents, correspondence so forgettable that his name escapes me. But I do recall that at the end of the day, after having two entire leadership team's worth of effort put to the grindstone on this one, your team was able to wish us well and even hope that things worked out for the couple. That's a pathetic joke.

Since we weren't able to put Tab A in Slot B it's no surprise that issues of difficulty or complexity, like New York and Dallas, weren't even officially broached between us. Your organization was so committed to "union participation as a priority" that you did not even involve us in the brainstorming, creation or strategic planning around the ten year hiring plan. It was no surprise then, to learn that the plan was predicated on faulty logic and assumptions that did not take into account the fact that the three years you used for retirement snapshot data were years when employees were least likely to retire. Your personal attempt to meet regularly with my union was undermined from within the ATO organization, and to this day no tangible proof exists that we ever met except for perhaps a couple dozen missing donuts from the Krasner Building.

The ATO's maintenance philosophy is dangerous and extreme. NATCA fears that replacing preventive maintenance with a "fix on fail" mentality that you hope will ultimately save money will actually erode an already thin margin of safety. The FAA/ATO's inability to hire and train sufficient aviation safety inspectors, engineers and certification specialists was the subject of a recent congressional hearing, and promises to do better come too little and too late. The results of these cost-cutting decisions won't be felt for several years, but when they are indeed felt we can all point back with regret at the decisions made to save money in the short term against the cost to the system in the long.

In fact, many of the members NATCA represents in the certification community have been around aircraft certification for quite some time, almost 30 years in many cases. They tell us that FAA oversight of type design safety has degraded at such an accelerating rate that we are rapidly approaching the point of complete abdication and hence effective deregulation. Since what we do does not usually have an immediate direct effect on aviation safety, as long as industry can truly be entrusted to "do the right thing"; with our fundamentally governmental responsibilities and authorities, all will be well. But

without the long term forces of independent regulatory accountability counteracting the short term economic and other transient forces facing business today, NATCA fears all will not be well for long.

From NATCA's perspective the FAA's lack of response to the GAO report on designees is telling. The FAA is continuing to implement ODA when they are completely unable to oversee their current designee systems. The FAA's lack of hiring of engineers in the Aircraft Certification field offices is exacerbated by the movement of managers to non-safety related positions, forcing employees to act for them. During this time of unprecedented growth, when a new airline can start up virtually overnight, the FAA's inability to focus on getting more employees working on safety action programs, Airworthiness Directives and new technology programs associated with Type Certificates and Supplemental Type Certificates is deeply troubling. The cumulative effect of these changes to the world's gold standard in air traffic maintenance and aircraft certification could be disastrous not only for the agency but the flying public we jointly serve.

The FAA/ATO "Mediator" press briefing on November 28th was noteworthy for several reasons. First and foremost, until that briefing and one you personally gave the AOPA leadership you had shied away from all things labor relations, even proclaiming that the ATO has "zero to do" with LR. To find you at the podium actively engaged in contract negotiation and briefing with the press was surprising to say the least. You had more to say about our contract than you have ever previously disclosed, in two years of meetings with NATCA's leadership team. Your briefing was also noteworthy from another perspective: It was WRONG. Your numbers were wrong, your characterizations of our positions were wrong, and your subsequent email message to ATO Management and Colleagues was in all likelihood an Unfair Labor Practice in and of itself.

For someone who proclaimed as recently as August that you had nothing to do with labor relations, and who insisted that his hands were tied, and who spoke of "shifting" authority and "evolving" responsibility, you sure took a hard stand, attempting to publicly damage our organization's ability to reach a voluntary collective bargaining agreement. You advocated skipping the progress being made at the bargaining table (where yesterday, within five minutes of meeting the parties had reached agreement on National Pay Procedures.)

You chose instead to shill for Blakey's request for mediation, in spite of the fact that your own negotiators publicly posted just one short week ago that, "We did manage to get quite a lot done though... we TAU'ed another handful of articles and exchanged a number of counter offers/proposals. This week is being spent away from the table as both teams (or at least the Agency Team) will be preparing for a two week session which runs from 11/28-12/09 back in McLean Va. Our schedule is presently running through 02/03/06 as we don't actually expect to be done by the ambitious date of Christmas '05, but we did discuss the possibility of adding negotiations dates through March 10, 2006." So...your contract team says they managed to get "quite a lot done," and they know that their schedule runs through the first two months of next year. And Joe Miniace has explored dates in March 2006 for negotiations. And yet the political appointees decided the time was neigh to call in the mediators? Far from being the "shot in the arm" we thought the ATO would be, this latest publicity stunt looked more like the FAA/ATO had shot themselves in the ass.

I could continue to catalog these points for you but I see no useful purpose in recapping the entire two disappointing years. Speaking of no useful purpose, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association's National Executive Board sees no useful purpose in continuing to support the deceptive pantomime that the Air Traffic Organization has become.

Therefore, NATCA has decided to withdraw all organizational NATCA support from the Air Traffic Organization effective immediately. We no longer endorse, support, condone, or otherwise encourage the organization you have created. In fact, at a time and place of our choosing we will openly and publicly denounce it, and the litany of our disappointments will make this email look like the Reader's Digest Condensed Version. Facts, like union presidents and FAA Administrators, continue to be stubborn things. This notification is quite pro-forma, since (window dressing notwithstanding) you have not included us in your organization's tactical or strategic discussions or decision-making since the day you took office, but it is important for us to mark this date and time for our union and our membership. History will record who has chosen wisely here, and based on the ATO's performance over the last two years we are very comfortable with that arrangement.

To be clear, our members will continue to perform their duties and will follow orders to perform other work as assigned. In spite of your organization's jihad against them they have remained consummate professionals and you can expect nothing less going forward. Nothing contained herein should be misconstrued as to constitute anything other than an organizational divorce. NATCA has irreconcilable differences with the ATO you have created. From our perspective the ATO had a once in a lifetime chance to make real and lasting change, all right. And the ATO blew it. Our efforts to date have done nothing more than disenfranchise our members and strengthen heavy-handed managers. We fear your organizational efforts will ultimately facilitate the degradation of an air traffic control system that we will be operating long after the current regime of political appointees and their sycophants have retreated down K Street to their public relations firms and cushy private sector deals. While others are picking up their pricey consulting arrangements we will pick up the jagged pieces of the air traffic control system, like we always do, and soldier on.

I wish you nothing but the best in your future endeavors. I am sincerely stricken that the ATO did not work out as promised. I invested a great deal of personal and political capital in your success, bringing to you a level of credibility with the workforce that you did not have or earn. I stood beside you every step of the way for the last two years, publicly and privately, in the Towers, the TRACONs, the Centers, on Capitol Hill, and among countless constituency groups. My public and private statements, speeches, interviews and conversations have been infused with my deep conviction that you were a man of high principle, great integrity and a personal friend of mine who would lend his genius to helping to solve some of the institutional problems we all knew the agency faced. My reward for that loyalty and faith and confidence and hope and trust and honor and integrity has been an unmitigated disaster for the people I represent, and for that I am profoundly embarrassed, deeply ashamed, and bitterly disappointed.

Best personal regards,

John S. Carr
President
NATCA
AFL-CIO

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