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When labor historians construct lists of the ten most important strikes in United States history, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers’ (PATCO) strike of August 1981 is certain to claim a prominent spot. Many labor activists and scholars of the contemporary labor movement see Ronald Reagan’s firing of more than eleven thousand striking air traffic controllers as a sort of fall from grace, the beginning of the decline of the labor movement. To be sure, there are others who would disagree with them, but all would concur that this strike was of major historic significance. Therefore, it is surprising that this is the first book-length scholarly treatment of the strike. The author, Willis Nordlund, is Dean of the School of Business at the College of West Virginia, a veteran United States Department of Labor staff person, and a multiengine, instrument-rated pilot. *Silent Skies* bears the imprint of his background.

Nordlund adopts as his point of view neither that of the air traffic controllers nor that of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Neither does he assume the guise of the “objective,” disinterested scholar. Instead, he assumes the perspective of the labor relations system itself, implying, if not openly arguing, that the conflict was avoidable, that such drastic measures need not have been taken by either side, and that there ought to have been a way to resolve the issues that led to the strike and the mass discharge. Rather than question why the system was unable to prevent such an ultimate showdown, Nordlund is content to place blame on both sides, particularly the leadership of PATCO and the FAA.

This perspective will disappoint scholars of the labor movement and activists alike. Nordlund is more interested in the personalities and foibles of individual union leaders and government bureaucrats than he is in the social and political forces that set the stage for this conflict. He misses a great opportunity to explore the breakdown of the labor relations system in a particular historical context precisely by assuming that the system itself was not part of the problem.

However, his analysis does have a valuable strength, equally rooted in his personal experience and interests. As a pilot, Nordlund understands how the air traffic control system was set up, how it works and does not work, its pressures and problems, and the on-the-job experiences of controllers. *Silent Skies* offers rich details about the controllers in their workplaces, the deterioration of their working conditions, and their growing frustrations. The reader also learns about the controllers’ traditional perquisites and FAA management’s efforts, in conjunction with the major airlines, to cut them back. Labor historians who have worked with Carter Goodrich’s notion of a “frontier of control” will especially appreciate Nordlund’s work here, even if it is not very analytically sophisticated.

In the end, however, this is a generally unsatisfying book. The PATCO strike and Reagan’s actions are too narrowly construed. The reader hungers for more contextualization of the events themselves—what was happening nationally in labor relations in the 1970s that set the stage for such a showdown—and
for more exploration of their consequences, not only in the airline industry but in the world of labor relations and unions more generally. How does this conflict reflect its era and, at the same time, become a shaper of its era? Nordlund just is not interested in questions of this order. And frankly, in pursuing the questions that are of interest to him, he has written a rather flat and uninspiring book. He has taken highly dramatic and compelling events and made them appear mundane. While historians will surely refer to this book as a source of information, they will not be assigning it in their classes.

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Beginning with the surge of interest in slavery a generation ago, the South has steadily emerged as an integral part of America’s labor past. From the mid-1970s into the early 1990s, attention flowed chiefly to the period from Reconstruction through World War One. And pathbreaking studies continue to appear on the women and men, white and black, who worked the farms, homes, docks, mines, forests, craft-shops, railroads, factories, and service trades of the New South. Lately, though, the frontier of research has shifted to the eras of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), World War Two, the early Cold War, and the civil rights movement—a chapter of Southern labor history once left to journalists, activists, and social scientists. *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995*, edited by Robert H. Zieger, offers a valuable road map of current scholarship. Comprising essays by twelve historians—some influential, others just launching their careers—*Southern Labor in Transition* serves as a companion to *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville, 1991), also edited by Zieger. As with the earlier collection, unionism is central to the essays under review, although this should not obscure their narrative and thematic diversity. What really brings these volumes together is their repudiation of regional caricatures; they could in fact be subsumed under the title (with apologies to the present journal) *Against Southern Exceptionalism*. Although the image of Southern working folk as docile, ornery, and allergic to unionism has taken a battering for some time now, few have argued more effectively for the South’s place in the mainstream of American labor history than Zieger has in his introductions to these two books. Particularly arresting is an irony made visible in the “lean years” of the late twentieth century: if the breadth of Southern unionism reaffirms the limits of regional distinctiveness, so, in our own time, does its long acquaintance with defeat.

Of course, none of the stories told here are unaffected by their regional setting. Some, like the two concerning textile workers, are of a decidedly Southern