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STATEMENT BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION DREW LEWIS AT A WHITE HOUSE NEWS CONFERENCE DECEMBER 9, 1981

The President today directed the Office of Personnel Management to re-open Federal employment to the air traffic controllers dismissed as a result of their strike against the government. They will be evaluated for suitability, as are all candidates for Federal employment. The controllers, however, will not be considered for re-employment at the FAA.

The President has taken this action because he believes the controllers should have a fair and equal opportunity to compete for any Federal job where they can meet the suitability standards and have the qualifications. He has excluded their eligibility for positions within the FAA for two reasons. First, those who went on strike showed a disregard for the FAA mission, to assure the safety of the airways, and their responsibility to the public in carrying out that mission. Second, our primary obligation is to have a safe and efficient system, and we can't do that when there is tension and friction between those who went on strike and those who stayed on the job.

As I have said many times, the issue at stake in PATCO's dispute with the government was a fundamental principle of law, not labor management relations. The controllers violated their oath, and in our system of government individuals and organizations cannot pick and choose the laws they will obey. That point has now been well established. Now is the time for compassion to those who choose to pursue careers with the Federal government. But we also owe to those who stayed on the job, despite severe pressures and considerable harassment, an obligation to respect their interests and concerns. In my conversations and meetings with working controllers, and in FAA Administrator Lynn Helms' many discussions and

(more)

other communications with our towers and centers, we are repeatedly advised by the dedicated professionals who stayed on the job that they do not want their former co-workers to return. The system is operating safely and efficiently. Relationships between controllers and pilots have never been better. There are fewer operational errors than before the strike. The morale at this point is high, and we believe that allowing the controllers who chose to strike to return to the FAA would be damaging to the safety and efficiency of our air traffic control system.

We believe, however, that those dismissed from their positions as controllers should be free to seek other Federal employment if they wish. The action by the President today gives them that option.

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