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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY DREW LEWIS AT A NEWS CONFERENCE WASHINGTON, D.C. JUNE 17, 1981

As you know, Federal Aviation Administration representatives met again today with officials of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization under the aegis of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service in an attempt to reach a contract settlement that would avert the strike threatened by PATCO for June 22nd.

We have made a serious and, in my judgment, a fair and comprehensive offer to the union -- an offer that recognizes the unique nature of the air traffic controller's job, an offer that addresses the issues and an offer that is fair.

Our proposal reflects, first of all, the FAA's basic commitment to safety. Maximum safety is the mission of the traffic control system, and our proposal recognizes the importance of the air traffic controllers to that system. Our proposal also reflects our responsibility for the public interest and our concern for the country as a whole. We are concerned, thirdly, for the inconvenience a strike would cause for a great many air travelers, and the damaging effect it would have on the nation's economy.

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We regret very much, therefore, that PATCO officials have seen fit to reject our proposal for a new contract and have broken off negotiations.

I want to emphasize again that we have made every effort to reach an agreement that is compatible with air safety, responsive to the controllers' concerns and is within reasonable budgetary limitations.

Let me outline briefly the terms of the FAA proposal.

First, with respect to pay benefits, we have offered a 10 percent increase in the basic pay of air traffic controllers who also act as on-the-job training instructors. This proposal and other pay benefits offered would be in addition to the pay and benefit increases given to other Federal employees.

While the controllers provide this training as a part of their regular duties, it does not require them to spend extra time beyond their regular shift. But when the controllers are acting as instructors, we agree that they should be compensated for those services.

Our proposal also recommended an increase in pay for night duty. Since some airport control towers and all of our traffic control centers operate 24 hours a day, while other towers are generally in operation 16 hours a day, most controllers work on a rotating shift basis involving some evening and night hours. The FAA presently pays a 10 percent salary shift differential for work between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. We proposed, in our offer, to increase that to 20 percent.

I might add that controllers also receive a 25 percent differential for non-overtime work on Sunday and double pay for holidays.

In fact, I think it is fair to point out that air traffic controllers are among the best-paid employees in the Federal government. A trainee can begin at one of the FAA's larger facilities at \$15,000 a year and within five years can reach the full performance level earning more than \$37,800 a year -- and that does not include overtime and other compensation.

On that basis, a controller now can earn as much as \$50,112 (plus overtime), which is the maximum salary currently allowed for a Federal career employee. Since the increased OJT and night duty differentials we have proposed could put an experienced controller well over that level, we had indicated to PATCO that we were prepared to seek a Congressional exemption from the pay ceiling to accommodate premium pay. In fact, the FAA assured the union that the Administration would go to the Congress for the enabling legislation required to meet the terms of the FAA's offer.

Second, with respect to the concerns expressed by the controllers over hours and working conditions, the FAA took into full consideration the uniqueness of the air traffic controller's job and the necessity for assuring working conditions consistent with air safety.

Unlike other Federal employees, who work an 8½-hour day (with a half hour for the lunch period), the normal shift for controllers is eight hours. Up to now, that has

not included a specified lunch period. In our proposal, we offered the controllers a guaranteed lunch period -- either 30 minutes free of duty obligations, or overtime pay for that period if -- for some reason -- a controller cannot take a regular lunch break.

What this means is that controllers would be working a 37½-hour week, while getting paid for 40.

All of these additional pay and working hours provisions that I have mentioned require Congressional action, which we have assured PATCO we would seek, and they represent benefits that would be in addition to whatever is done in terms of increases for all Federal employees.

Also in regard to working hours, we offered our assurance to PATCO that none of the controllers assigned to the busiest airport control towers and to the traffic control centers (and that includes about 11,500 of the 17,500 controllers in the work force) would have to spend more than 6½ hours at an operating position. We realize that watching a radar scope for a prolonged period can be fatiguing, and we recognize the demanding nature of the controller's job in the busiest towers and centers. We respect the need for the controller to get away from his primary work station periodically, and the 6½ hour limitation on duty station time.

Third, with respect to separation benefits, the FAA some years ago supported a special retirement program exclusively for air traffic controllers. Under that law, controllers can, in fact, retire after 25 years' service or at age 50 with 20 years' service.

As a supplement to that retirement provision, we proposed in our offer to PATCO to pay one year's salary as severance pay to any controller, with five years of consecutive service at any high traffic level facility, who may be disqualified from service for medical reasons. We estimate that about a third of the controllers presently in the work force could be eligible for that benefit.

Fourth, with respect to participation in FAA development of air traffic control procedures, PATCO members have expressed a concern for a voice in that process. In our proposal we offered PATCO the opportunity to designate members to serve on national and local advisory committees concerned with possible changes in FAA controller procedures. The FAA must, of course, retain its management prerogatives, but the government is more than willing to extend to PATCO an invitation to take an advisory role in the procedural development process. In this way PATCO's experience will be available to the FAA in its decision-making responsibilities.

These proposals, as I have outlined them, highlight the offer we made to PATCO earlier this week. It was a fair, comprehensive and well-reasoned response to PATCO's demands. Let me say again that it represents a carefully thought-out proposal -- one that takes into full account both the uniqueness of the controller profession and the concerns we all share for the safety of the airways.

As stated earlier, we regret that PATCO has elected to reject the FAA offer and to break-off negotiations. If a strike occurs it will come at a high cost to the union; it will seriously inconvenience thousands of air travelers; and it will cause millions of dollars in economic loss to the airlines and to air commerce.

As President Reagan said yesterday at his news conference, all of us must get behind the efforts by the Administration to turn our economy around. Democrats or Republicans, management or labor, we must support the President on the fundamental issues of economic recovery.

America's air traffic controllers have a long and illustrious record of service to the public. We believe they are law-abiding citizens. To take this course of action now, after a serious and reasonable offer has been made, suggests to me that the controllers are breaking faith with the public and failing the many Americans who have previously placed very strong faith in them and their dedication to safe and efficient service.

I sincerely hope that an agreement can be reached before the deadline set by PATCO. In any case, I assure you air safety will not be compromised or jeopardized. We will maintain schedules only to the extent that the system can be operated safely. We remain prepared to meet with PATCO.

It should now be clear to all that a strike would constitute an illegal action, with PATCO -- and individual controllers -- subject to criminal prosecution. PATCO leadership and the controllers have been advised of the possible consequences of any illegal job action by the Department of Justice.

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