# Labor in Focus   by Marianna Wertz

## Re-hire the air traffic controllers!

*A GAO report indicates "serious problems" in the air traffic control workforce.*

The United States General Accounting Office (GAO) submitted a comprehensive report to the U.S. Secretary of Transportation on March 6, 1986, which is a sweeping condemnation of the current status of the air traffic control work force. The main conclusion of this report, which has sparked intense controversy on Capitol Hill, is that since the August 1981 strike, in which the Reagan administration fired all 11,700 striking controllers and broke the controllers union, there has been a serious decline in staffing by fully qualified personnel. This has led, according to the extensive survey done by the GAO, on which the report was based, to "serious concerns" on the part of controllers and their supervisors "about their ability to continue to maintain the proper margin of safety."

The report was commissioned from the Resources, Community, and Economic Development Division (RCEDD) of the GAO by the Subcommittee on Transportation, House Committee on Appropriations. It was released by Herbert R. McLure, Associate Director of the RCEDD, at a hearing before the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight of the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation, and simultaneously presented to Elizabeth H. Dole, the administration's Secretary of Transportation.

Even before the report's findings were released, Secretary Dole announced that FAA will add 1,000 more controllers—500 each in fiscal years 1986 and 1987. However, as the GAO report points out, it will still take these new hirees two years or more to progress to fully trained status.

The hottest political issue raised by the report, and by those who rightly view the breaking of the controllers' union as the opening shot of a war by Wall Streeters inside the administration to break the nation's unions, is the question of rehiring the fired controllers.

In early June, Rep. Guy Molinari, (R-N.Y.), introduced a bill that would provide a mechanism for the FAA to give priority in hiring the 1,000 new controllers, to those fired after the strike. In June 13 hearings on the bill before the House Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee, Molinari said, "We are engaged in a dangerous game—literally a race against time— to avert major air disasters which would result in a substantial loss of life. . . . We have a system that is dangerously stressed due to lack of experience. This is directly impacting safety. There is only one source available where the FAA can buy that experience and that is from the group that was fired in 1981."

Walter Luffsey, the FAA's Associate Administrator for Air Traffic, responded immediately: "Rehiring the controllers who were terminated for striking is not a consideration nor, for that matter, will it be."

The GAO report does not deal with this issue, per se. It simply makes a solid case for the need to do something immediately to remedy the situation.

Its major findings, based on FAA data for the period from July 1981 through September 1985, questionnaire survey of some 4,500 radar qualified controllers, 1,000 first-line supervisors, and the managers of the 20 air route traffic control centers and the 54 busiest terminal facilities in the continental United States, include the following:

• "FAA does not have as many fully qualified, experienced controllers at major air traffic control facilities as managers, supervisors, and controllers believe are needed, and as are called for by FAA's standards and goals. . . .

• "Air traffic activity has reached record levels and is at the point where controllers and their supervisors believe they are overworked during peak periods, especially at centers. Moreover, air traffic is expected to continue to grow.

• "Overtime is likely to remain high at the centers and controllers and supervisors we sampled feel the overtime being worked is negatively affecting controllers' ability to perform their duties.

• "There are problems with the quality and amount of on-the-job training being given to new controllers.

• "There are fairly widespread communications and other employee/management problems at the facility level that are adversely affecting the morale of controllers and supervisors."

The report's major recommendation is to-the-point: "We recommend that FAA impose restrictions on air traffic until both the number of fully qualified controllers and overtime requirements meet FAA's goals."

*EIR* recommends careful study of this report, and a strong lobbying effort to ensure its implementation, as rapidly as possible.