

For Want of Air Traffic Controllers, Lives Will Be Lost

by Anita Gallagher

If the investigation of the July 1 collision of a DHL jet and a Russian passenger plane over southern Germany is truthful, it will find that privatization, with its profit-driven understaffing of air traffic controllers, caused 71 deaths. And, its recommendation would warn, that if the political will is not found to end insane cost-cutting in one of the highest pressure jobs a human being can hold, many more will die in air crashes.

The horrific crash puts a red flag on President George Bush's first move toward privatizing air traffic control in the United States. On June 6, Bush, declared that air traffic control is not "an inherently governmental function," by removing that language from a Clinton Executive Order. Bush's move was immediately denounced by aviation experts around the world; as Fuzz Bhimji, the former president of the now-privatized Canadian Air Traffic Controllers Association, succinctly put it, "Privatization is really about money."

The Collision in Southern Germany

At the time of the July 1 collision, the entire aviation zone over southern Germany was being directed by only one controller of the privatized Swiss air traffic control agency, Skyguard. The controller was directing five flights on two different radio frequencies, as the other controller on duty took a break.

Skyguard has acknowledged that an automated alarm system, which should have warned ground control that the two planes were on a collision course, was down for routine maintenance. Skyguard has also admitted problems in its radar system; after three near-misses, a commissioned report found it below European Union standards.

While German air traffic controllers at nearby Karlsruhe had picked up the collision potential two minutes before the crash, the lone controller at Skyguard first warned the Russian plane only 44 seconds before the collision.

The German controllers tried repeatedly to reach the Skyguard controller, but could not—because Skyguard's main phone line was out of order, and its only backup line was busy.

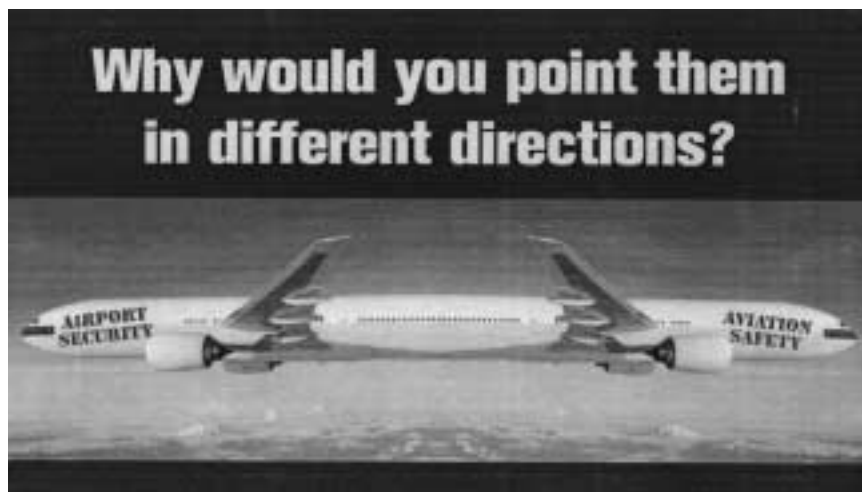
Privatization of air traffic control has proven a financial failure that guts safety worldwide:

- In Britain, the 11-month old, partially privatized National Air Traffic Services (NATS) is already facing bankruptcy, despite a £30 million bailout in March. The £60 million profit forecast has morphed into an £80 million loss. On the nights of Feb. 23-24, a 400-mile-wide corridor of airspace across England and the North Sea was closed for two nights, when no replacement could be found for a controller who called in sick. At night, air zones are enlarged, to save money, placing an enormous burden on each controller.

- In Canada, whose privatization "success" the Bush Administration proposed to study last year, Nav Canada announced last Fall that it would raise fees by 6%, to cover a projected \$145 million revenue shortfall. Nav Canada may face a strike by its 2,300 air traffic controllers on July 19, over long shifts, mandatory overtime, six-day work weeks, and wages.

- In Australia, air traffic controllers walked out earlier this year to protest pay and safety issues arising from stress and fatigue. Airservices, already sued over some crashes, is considering ducking liability by limiting assistance to planes in trouble, according to *The Australian*.

In the United States, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association and the AFL-CIO report a critical shortage in hiring of air traffic controllers, and staffing of airports barely at the authorized level. A Government Accounting Office study estimates that one-third of the current 15,000 controllers will leave in the next five years, with mandatory retirement at age 56. It can take up to five years to train a fully certified controller.



The National Air Traffic Controllers Association placed this ad in the June 10 Washington Post and Washington Times.