

National Air Traffic Controllers Association
AFL-CIO



January 26, 2006

The Honorable Marion C. Blakey
Federal Aviation Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20591

Dear Marion, *Marion*

As you may know, Senators Obama (D-IL), Murray (D-WA) and Lautenberg (D-NJ) today introduced a major piece of legislation in the United States Senate designed to restore fairness and true accountability to the FAA and NATCA's contract negotiating process.

NATCA welcomes this much-needed legislative initiative. We remain committed to pursuing a negotiated settlement that is in the best interests of taxpayers, the flying public and America's air traffic controllers. However, it is increasingly clear that FAA management shares no such commitment and is more intent on creating a false atmosphere of crisis and acrimony.

The apparent goal? **To accelerate a predetermined drive to impasse and imposition of a contract, gutting established principles of collective bargaining.**

Nowhere is this more obvious than in your own public pronouncements which have become riddled with inaccuracies and half truths. For that reason, I write today to ask you to forswear making misleading statements, disavow your determination to drive our negotiations to impasse, and honestly pledge yourself to a productive negotiating process.

Below you will find specific examples of misleading statements you have recently made.

Progress of Negotiations

Since you declared the negotiations "stalled" last month, 31 contract articles have been agreed upon. That is 20% of all proposed articles: hardly slow progress at the negotiating table by any measure.

Yet this month you continue to impose an unrealistic timetable on negotiations, publicly stating you expect the process to take "weeks, not months." You will recall that negotiations over the last contract took well over a year to conclude. With so many more

time-consuming issues on the table during the current negotiations, it is simply not accurate of you to say that “we should have had a deal by now.” The undeniable reality is that good-faith negotiations take time.

FAA Budget Considerations

You have repeatedly asserted that labor costs are “crippling” the FAA’s budget, erroneously implying that the majority of the FAA’s operating costs are comprised of air traffic controller salaries. In fact, as you know, the FAA figure for “labor costs” includes pay and benefits for all personnel, including those in management. According to your own numbers, the total compensation costs (pay, retirement, benefits, and overtime) for air traffic controllers is only 17% of the total FAA Budget and 31% of the FAA Operations Budget.

You consistently claim that controller salaries have “soared,” arguing that “the stakes for the taxpayers in these negotiations could not be higher.” What you have consistently ignored, however, is that a vast majority of the higher paid, longer serving, controllers are set for retirement. Three out of every four controllers will be eligible to retire in the next decade; over 10% will be eligible to retire in the next year alone. As you know, under the current system which was endorsed by NATCA, controllers who replace retiring personnel will be compensated at a significantly lower level than before; controller salaries start at around \$16,000. The FAA’s own 10 year hiring plan states they will hire 4704 new controllers over the next 5 years. Under the NATCA pay proposal (the status quo), the FAA would save a massive \$543 million by hiring the lower paid controllers.

A final point on this topic: the FAA has claimed that the current contract agreement (signed in 1998) has caused an increase in base pay of 75%. But that increase does not derive from the prior contract, rather it was driven by standard rises awarded to all federal employees (55%), increases in locality rates (average of 14%) and an increase in average benefits (5%). You will note that none of these factors has anything to do with the last contract signed.

NATCA’s Negotiating Position

You have argued NATCA’s proposals to be “completely unrealistic.” However, when simply stated, I am sure most impartial observers would side with us. On pay, NATCA is not proposing an excessive pay hike: as you know, we are proposing the *status quo*. Surely if either party is proposing a dramatic shift it is the FAA; while you carefully assert that you would protect “base” pay, in point of fact your proposal would cut actual take home pay for air traffic controllers between 20% and 40%.

You have cited your fear that the union will become “even more aggressive” in its negotiating position. But as you know, we have already made major concessions, including representation on technical projects, our pay proposal and many others.

In short, Marion, you have consistently maligned NATCA's intentions and mischaracterized the nature of our negotiations. This is a movie we have seen before during the ILWU contract negotiations in 2002. The tactics are eerily similar: publish distorted statistics about salaries, declare that workers make too much and work too little, create a false sense of urgency, claim that excessive pay prevents introduction of new technology, impose unrealistic deadlines and aggressively move to impose your will on an unwilling workforce. About the only thing we don't expect to see from the Blakey-Miniace playbook this time around is the lockout.

While this approach does service to your political ambitions, it does not serve those you were appointed to represent and protect: taxpayers, the flying public or air traffic controllers.

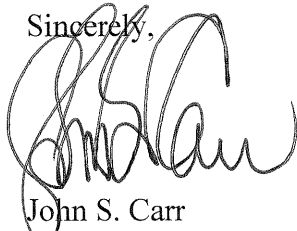
Therefore, I call on you to pledge yourself to honesty in public pronouncements and good faith at the negotiating table. If you are sincere in your desire to reach a voluntary negotiated agreement then I believe it is truly within our grasp. In just the last forty-eight hours our teams have agreed to five contract articles and withdrawn another. The total now stands at 91 articles completed out of 152.

Marion, I ask you to stand down from your public pronouncements of urgency and to allow our competent and professional negotiating teams to do the work we empowered them to do free from your interference.

I ask you to direct your team to engage in meaningful dialogue on the issues of substance which lie before us. Your only change to your initial pay proposal – changing the duration from seven years to five years – does not constitute true compromise by any measure. By contrast NATCA has shown real and meaningful movement on the subject of compensation and I encourage you to instruct your team to do the same if a voluntary agreement is to be reached.

For my part, I can pledge to you that NATCA will continue to approach these negotiations with a positive attitude and an open mind. NATCA was certified as a union under President Ronald Reagan, and we have engaged in good faith bargaining with every FAA Administrator since 1987. We have reached voluntary agreements for the air traffic control workforce with every one of your predecessors. I am confident that if you are sincere in your desire to reach a voluntary agreement, we will find a way to get the job done.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John S. Carr". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "C".

John S. Carr
President, NATCA