

# In today's air traffic controller profession, you cannot separate safety from LR

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I had the privilege of speaking to our annual Communicating for Safety conference in Chicago recently and I took the opportunity to deliver an important truth to a room full of pilots, controllers and aviation safety advocates:

In today's air traffic controller profession, you cannot separate safety from labor relations.

There's just no way.

While I wish this weren't true, the enormous challenges we as controllers face in just doing our jobs despite a horribly failed and dysfunctional Federal Aviation Administration management group has proven to me that you cannot divorce our contract battles and imposed work rules nightmare from the day-to-day mission we have sworn to uphold in trying to ensure the safety of the flying public.

As I told the CFS audience, I was kind of confused on what speech I was going to give. I've been giving my labor relations union busting speech to every member meeting I attend.

And I know in theory, I was supposed to talk about the safety of the National Airspace System (NAS), not speak on labor relations (LR) and human relations (HR) issues.

Theoretically we are to separate labor relations issues from safety issues, like the airlines and the commercial pilots do.

But here's the difference between controllers and pilots on this issue: Those of us on the ground don't have the luxury to shut the cockpit door and fly the plane across the country without management invention.

In the ATC world, management is always there when you are working position, getting in your ear, issuing orders, distracting and disrupting your operation.

In the airlines and aviation industry companies, they seem to have the ability to have the line of demarcation drawn between LR/HR and safety. However, in the ATC profession we do not have that luxury.

Thus, NATCA does not have the pure ability to separate safety from LR/HR issues, whether it's procedures that we are prevented from developing or equipment we are kept from

shaping. Issues from time on position, annual leave, sick leave, break rotation, shift changes, RDO's, fatigue, pay and so many other LR/HR matters all impact the safety of the NAS.

Our beloved system is in a downward spiral and the IWR needs to be addressed immediately! The absence of a catastrophic accident does not mean the system is safe, no matter how many times FAA leadership spins its ignorant tune.

The FAA continues to talk out of both sides of its mouth. The agency says it stands for a safety culture in the NAS, but really it stands for the almighty dollar, the bottom-line reality of a run-it-like-a-business agenda and the pursuit of complete control over our work environment regardless how that impacts safety.

It is no longer just NATCA saying the FAA is failing in the safety arena. Just look at the front page of *USAToday*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and so many other hundreds of media outlets across the country and around the world these past few weeks. The drumbeat has been relentless and grown louder ever since our courageous champion of aviation safety matters, Chairman James Oberstar, held a Congressional hearing to question the FAA on its complete failure to properly inspect aircraft.

Add to that our continued efforts to highlight our staffing failures and the epidemic of exhausted, overworked controllers being assigned overtime, longer shifts and more traffic, and you have an FAA in total defensive mode, under siege from all sides alleging the agency is more interested in cozy relationships with the airlines than upholding its mandate to protect the safety of the flying public at all times.

As long as FAA managers continue to drop a hammer on the head of controllers, because of some violation such as operational errors, sick leave, medical issues, non compliance with IWR, safety will be linked with labor relations. In some incidents, the agency is even fabricating charges to stoke the manager's power and egos, to exercise the complete control over our entire work environment.

This all impacts safety!

As long as the FAA keeps behaving like this, safety will never be a priority.

Just look at the agency's Safety Management System (SMS). You mean to tell me NATCA and air traffic controllers are not a stakeholder in the system? Are you joking? How could we not be? Yet some manager who hasn't worked airplanes in 20 years is now a stakeholder.

The FAA mission is no longer about safety. The goal is the absolute control over the union and the workforce. The fact that we had to beg to get off the schedule and to obtain official time just for the privilege of attending CFS, now one of the premier aviation safety conferences in the world, is proof in itself.

The arrogance of FAA management is that not one FAA manager came to this conference or to the Archie League Medal of Safety awards banquet to support the controllers in the system. They think they're superior to the controllers and that we have nothing to offer to the safety of the system.

Wrong! We the controllers are the ones responsible for running the system safely. This despite the distraction of the incompetence of FAA management.

Every FAA facility has as a sign on the front door. It says any interruption/distraction could result in a loss of human life.

Yet the IWR is a major distraction to the operation and the safety of the system.

The FAA must soon decide if it wants to continue down this destructive path that's destroying the safest, most efficient system in the world, or work toward a full safety culture lined with a fair collective bargaining agreement and the return of a collaborative relationship built on mutual respect.

The choice the FAA needs to make is pretty clear. Or else we are headed toward a disastrous future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul M. Rinaldi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.