

Collision over Washington: The political issues and unanswered questions behind the DC airline disaster

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As of Friday evening, 41 of the 67 victims of the midair collision between an American Airlines passenger jet and a US Army Black Hawk helicopter over Washington D.C. had been recovered from the Potomac River. While the full details are still emerging, the disaster, the political infighting and cover-up which have followed it already expose and intersect with a colossal political crisis and instability in the United States.

There is, first of all, the response of President Trump. Under normal conditions, the president of the United States responds to a disaster of such magnitude with platitudes expressing sympathy for the victims and their families, along with pledges that a thorough investigation will be conducted.

Trump, in contrast, launched into an unhinged and racist rant at a press conference on Thursday denouncing air traffic controllers for the crash. “Common sense,” Trump declared, made it clear that “diversity, equity and inclusion” policies were responsible for hiring workers—that is, racial and ethnic minorities—who are not “competent” and “suffer severe intellectual disabilities, psychiatric problems and other mental and physical conditions.” Trump followed up this fascistic tirade by incorporating its content into an executive order.

An immediate purpose was certainly to deflect attention from the clear evidence, apparent within a day of the crash, that chronic underfunding and understaffing of air traffic control—essential to airline safety—were key contributing factors.

Media reports cite an initial Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) report revealing that, at the time of the crash, a single air traffic controller was managing

both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters at Reagan National Airport (DCA)—normally a two-person job.

Moreover, Reagan National has long faced warnings about unsafe conditions as air traffic has surged over the past decade. Hundreds of helicopters fly daily between government institutions, intelligence headquarters and military bases around the capital. This has led to a surge in near-misses. Indeed, just one day before Wednesday’s fatal crash, a jet at DCA had to abort its landing to avoid a helicopter in its path.

Across the country, more than 90 percent of the 313 air traffic control facilities operate below the Federal Aviation Administration’s recommended staffing levels, according to an analysis published in the *New York Times* Friday, with 73 facilities operating with at least a quarter of their workforce missing. Air traffic controllers are routinely forced to work six-day weeks and 10-hour shifts.

A separate analysis by the *Times* from 2023 found that the FAA recorded 503 “significant” air traffic control lapses in the previous year—an increase of more than 65 percent from the year before.

The conditions in air safety are one expression of the decay of the social infrastructure, the product of the complete subordination of social and economic life to an oligarchy that dictates policies. It is now nearly 45 years since the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981. Then-President Reagan crushed the strike by firing more than 11,000 controllers, with the complicity of the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus and in the face of mass opposition in the working class.

Seventeen years later, National Airport was renamed after Reagan, in a tribute to his successful union-busting, in bipartisan legislation passed by Congress

and signed into law by Democrat Bill Clinton.

The defeat of PATCO opened the floodgates for a wholesale assault on the entire working class. Successive administrations, regardless of party, pushed wave after wave of cost-cutting, privatization and deregulation. Today, there are fewer fully certified air traffic controllers than in 1981, and those who remain are forced to work dangerously long shifts under increasingly hazardous conditions.

Trump's policies of social arson will immensely intensify this crisis. On Thursday, the day after the crash, air traffic controllers and other federal workers received a letter from the Office of Management and Budget, but originating from billionaire oligarch Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency," urging them to resign from their jobs.

According to the *New York Times*, the letter stated that the government was "encouraging people to move from lower productivity jobs in the public sector to higher productivity jobs in the private sector." This presumably refers to shifting people out of "useless" occupations like air traffic control, fighting pandemic diseases, or providing telephone consultation for Social Security and Medicare recipients, into "higher productivity" jobs like Wall Street, insurance and other swindles.

Finally, while media coverage has focused on air traffic control failures, one major question remains largely unexamined: What exactly was the Black Hawk military transport helicopter doing in Washington's airspace at the time of the collision?

According to newly confirmed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, the helicopter was engaged in a practice exercise related to "Continuity of Government" (COG). This term refers to the most sensitive operations of the American state, aimed at maintaining the control of the vast US military-intelligence apparatus by the president in the event of a national emergency, such as war or civil unrest. As the WSWs reported yesterday, the flight path indicates that it was returning from a location north of the capital along the Potomac River, possibly CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

According to initial reports, the Black Hawk was also flying above the designated altitude for its route when it crossed into the path of the incoming American Airlines jet. Why did it deviate from its designated route and altitude? How did a military aircraft operating

in the most heavily monitored airspace in the world end up intruding into a well-known landing path for commercial airliners?

The crash takes place in the context of a sweeping effort by the Trump administration to massively expand the role of the military in domestic affairs. In the first days of his administration, Trump issued a series of executive orders that assigned to US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) the mission of "sealing" the borders and countering the so-called "invasion" of immigrants.

These orders frame mass migration as a military emergency, justifying the direct intervention of the armed forces in what have always in the past been civilian matters. At the same time, the administration has signaled plans to invoke the Insurrection Act, a move that would allow the use of the military throughout the United States to suppress domestic political opposition.

Under Trump, the transformation of the US into a militarized police state is accelerating at an unprecedented pace. The events surrounding this crash indicate that, at the very least, these preparations are being conducted with reckless disregard for public safety. The Washington D.C. disaster, coming less than 10 days into the new administration, is an indication of the massive social and political convulsions to come.



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