

## WHY SOLIDARITY DID NOT TRANSFORM INTO POWER — EXPLAINING THE FAILURE OF THE STRIKE AT EASTERN AIRLINES IN 1989

**Chin-fen Chang**

Institute of Sociology, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica

### Abstract

After deregulation, the airline market became extremely competitive in the United States. Wage concessions were common practices in most major carriers. Being unsatisfied with the tough management and the proposed wage cuts, the machinists of Eastern Airlines went on strike, with the support of pilots and flight attendants, in 1989. The strike failed about two years later. The American unions have long lost the support of the working class because of their individualistic ideology. The Eastern strike showed a rare labor solidarity but did not transform into the workers' power.

**Keywords:** deregulation, strike, labor solidarity, decline of unionization, Eastern Airlines, Republican Administration, pro-business.

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## I. Preface

On March 4, 1989, around 20,000 employees of the now defunct Eastern Airlines (hereafter Eastern) went on strike. The cause of the strike was the refusal by the machinists' union to accept a wage concession proposed by Eastern. The showdown occurred when Eastern did not agree to soften the position. The strike dealt a fatal blow to the troubling Eastern when 8,000 flight attendants and, more important, 3,600 pilots refused to cross the picket line of the machinists. It went on for nearly two years and was called off one week before the airline shut down its operations completely. In terms of both the number of participants and the duration, it was the largest strike in the American labor history during the 1980s. However, at the end of the strike most Eastern workers had already been out of job for approximately two years.

At the beginning of the strike, several developments seemed to favor the strikers. First, the strike showed a labor solidarity rarely seen since the 1980s in the United States. In addition to gaining the support of the AFL-CIO, the Eastern strikers evoked expressions of sympathy from workers in several other airlines and a few unions in the transportation industry. The unions successfully portrayed the management of Eastern as hostile to the labor and intransigent. Even though Frank Lorenzo, the President of Texas International (the holding company of Eastern), was still a tough opponent, he could not abort the Eastern labor contract under the law as he did after taking over Continental Airlines in 1983. This event also attracted considerable publicity in the mass media. The strike itself and the impacts of airline industry deregulation were headline news in the press and on the major national TV stations for several days. According to some polls, people felt sympathetic to the strikers' cause. Furthermore, in Washington, showing their supports to the unions, Congress voted several times asking the Bush Administration to mediate the dispute. The Eastern workers seemed to have a good chance to win the strike against the company. However, the strikers failed to force the Eastern management to go back to the bargaining table.

The unions also tried hard to get the Bush Administration involved in mediating the dispute and to stop Frank Lorenzo from selling Eastern assets. They failed, too. Neither did the unions succeed in buying out Eastern or in finding a suitable outside buyer. For the management, the final shutdown of the company might not be a bad result, but for the unions it was certainly an unexpected failure.

This paper aims to analyze the incidence of Eastern strike and explain its failures. Clearly, deregulation, the management style, the lack of political support, and some other less important factors all contributed to the failure of the strike. Take the deregulation for example. The U.S. airline industry was completely transformed by deregulation, effective since 1978. The market became more competitive, flights increased, and average fares were much lower than before. While consumers gained from deregulation, the biggest losers were the airline employees. Labor market outcomes such as wages and fringe benefits were cut in almost all major airlines. Many workers lost their jobs because of bankruptcies, company downsizing, or mergers. The Eastern strike partially reflected a strong labor reaction to these changes. However, the impacts of deregulation were not necessarily detrimental, since some major carriers still survived under the external changes. Neither the management style was crucial for the failure of the strike. A tough stance by the company was sustained due to the implicit support by the state. This paper intends to go beyond these direct factors and point out other underlying reasons for the failure of the strike. I argue that as the proportion of the organized workforce kept dropping and the loss of public approval was obvious, the unions left little bargaining power.<sup>1</sup> To win their strike against the company, what the Eastern workers needed was more than the solidarity among Eastern workers or even that among union members. As reflected in the Eastern case, the unions just could not create enough pressure to force the management to back down or to push the Bush Administration to get

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the labor unions mainly represent the AFL-CIO and industrial and craft unions. The discussion does not intend to apply to professional unions.

involved. I argue that the ideology of labor organizing contributed to a large part of the difficult situation faced by American unions. Both the decline of union power and the lack of public approval were rooted in the American unionism. The failure of the Eastern strike was a consequence, and a victim, of the long term decline of the union power.

In the following I commence with discussing the emphasis of economism by the American unions and the decline of union strength. It is then followed by explaining the background of the Eastern strike, the long-term tense relations between the management and the unions in Eastern, the deterioration after Frank Lorenzo's takeover of the company, and the strike itself.<sup>2</sup> The third part of the paper explains the failure of the strike. In the last section, I conclude that American unions may need to change both their organizing and bargaining strategies to win back the working class and public support.

## II. Explaining the American Unionism

The continuous, significant decline of unionization in the U.S. has been documented in many studies. The measures used include the proportion of union members in labor force, frequencies of strikes, and the size (e.g., Chaison and Rose, 1991; Craver, 1993; Goldfield, 1987). According to the statistics compiled from Statistical Abstracts of various years, the percentage of workers belonged to a union steadily dropped from over 30% in the 1950s to 15.5% in 1994. The percentage of workers unionized would be even lower if we calculated only those in the private sector (Chaison and Rose, 1991:15). Researchers provide various explanations of this phenomenon, including unions' regionalism, the decline of unions' organizing efforts, conservative leadership, unfavorable public image, changing industrial structures, in-

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the narrations about the strike in Eastern Airline were based on reports in *AFL-CIO News*, *The New York Times*, and other sources. To make the paper more readable, I did not provide citations of sources for every account I made. I included citations when I quoted specific words or some important decisions.

creasing white-collar and non-unionized jobs, and the pro-business Republican presidencies (Goldfield, 1987; Edwards and Podgursky, 1986; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie, 1986). Some of these factors are external to the control of unions. The increasing importance of tertiary industry and the policy of deregulation are two examples. However, there are other elements endogenous to the union itself. These include union's organizing and bargaining philosophy. The arguments presented below are developed from some concepts proposed by Jacoby (1991:178). He identified three features of American unionism: centering the bargaining efforts on the individual plant or company, concerning mainly work conditions, and lower union density. The first two features are closely related and could be seen as the reflection of economism of American unions. And the lower percentage of unionized workers is partially the result of the economism. I elaborate each of them in the following.

### A. Economism

American unions truly believed the individualism as the valuable American spirit. In this regard they are alike the general public and employers of the country (Jacoby, 1991:175; Touraine, 1986). To put it simply, individualism represents a belief in the freedom of an individual to pursue one's interests with right means. As a contrast to collectivism, the idea of individualism emphasizes the least interference of the state or an organization on a person's actions. Thus, for the employers even the establishment of union organizations betrayed this American spirit. While American unions refused to identify with the socialists ideas, they eventually defined the function of labor organizations as bargaining mainly for members' economic interests. Aronowitz (1983) called this kind of philosophy as "**economism**" (p.70) and explained its meanings as the following:

*American economism in the labor and progressive movements assumes that (a) workers are only interested in wages and benefits or*

*shop floor issues, (b) politics is a foreign discourse because it implies ideological appeals, . . . (p. 215).*

These statements illustrated the focus of unions' bargaining on issues such as wage increases, seniority pay, and job classifications. Brody (1993: 81) also offered his descriptions to the 'commitment' to economic interests by saying that American labor organizations ". . . focused so militantly on narrow job interests, insisted on insulating labor's concerns from the political sector, so disinclined to question the standing order or to define its mission in class terms." One of the products of holding this ideology was the labor-capital accord between big industrial unions, such as United Automobile Workers, and mega companies, such as General Motors (GM). Based on this accord, unions gave up the participation in the decision-making of the workplace and promised no-strike during the contract term in exchange for regularly wages increases and other benefits for union members (Aronowitz, 1975; Bowles, 1982). It was a deal made during the period of economic prosperity after World War II in the U.S. However, the structural changes beginning from the late 1970s made the American unions the victim of '. . . the vicissitudes of the national economy . . .' as the result of the deindustrialization (Aronowitz, 1983:215; Bluestone and Harrison, 1982).

Thus, unlike their counterparts in Europe, American unions had explicitly shown their opposition to socialism or any related ideologies and their proponents (Jacoby, 1991). In comparison to other countries, the character of American union organization is more like 'reformist' than revolutionary (Mann, 1973:42). The attitude of anti-socialism or any other kinds of collectivism was more valued by American unions than other capitalists countries (Lipset, 1986a). Union leaders believed in the union's own power in bargaining with the capitalists and even dismissed the idea to have their own political party (Barbash, 1991). The labor organizations did not identify themselves nor were seen as representing the American working class or other social groups (Masters and Delaney, 1987). Unions were inactive in some social issues and thus alienated themselves from the minorities or other

interest groups (Brody, 1980; Edsall, 1984; Piore, 1986). According to some polls, the American public usually “. . . separate unions from workers” (Brody, 1993:83). The success of union leaders were usually judged by how much economic gain or job rights they obtained for their members. Unions did fulfill their duties to some extent (e.g., Freedman and Medoff, 1984). The labor-capital accord formed after World War II, the bargaining issues of locals, and the emphasis on wage adjustments, finalized the union’s image as only concerning with members’ economic benefits in the American public (Raskin, 1986).

It is ironic that, the union’s endorsement with individualism was intended as a gesture to follow “the American way”. The focus on economism aimed to pursue the best interests for American workers. However, their sole concern on raising members’ economic benefits received blames and disapproval from the American public and were seen as selfish. And the exchange of shop-floor issues for economic gains also alienated the working class (Aronowitz, 1975).

The loss of support from the working class and the general public was particularly crucial for the American unions because of the country’s bargaining pattern. With the institutionalization of industrial relations since the passage of Wagner Act in 1935, the government (including National Labor Relations Board), the court, and the legislative system took control of the rules-setting between the capital and the unions. It is actually difficult for the unions to have influences on the political system since the state was generally hostile to the labor organizations judging from the American labor history (Jacoby, 1991). The collective bargaining and strike (used when collective bargaining did not work) became the two most important weapons against employers for the unions (Jacoby, 1991; Shalev and Korpi, 1980). Even that, being satisfied with the labor-capital agreement, a former president of AFL-CIO once was quoted as saying: “. . . Where you have a well-established industry and a well-established union, you are getting to the point where a strike doesn’t make a sense” (Robinson, 1981:295).

Still, to increase their influences on political or legislative issues, the

unions were active in several political activities, and mostly endorsed Democratic candidates (焦興鑑, 1994). However, the scale could not match with that of employers' associations (Delaney and Masters, 1991). And even though labor organizations still had impacts on the voting of most union members (Juravich and Shergold, 1988), due to the small number of workers represented by the unions, the influences were either limited or ineffective in some cases (Delaney and Masters, 1991: 327-333). Even among the Democrat Party, the union's political influences appeared less successful in lobbying Democratic Senators in the 1980s (Dark, 1996). Feeling with the decline of union strength since the 1970s, some Democratic legislators even attempted to keep distance from the unions (Edsall, 1984:149). C. Wright Mills once claimed unions to be 'dependent variables' in the American political power circle (1956:265). This description still applied well to the situation of union's status in the 1980s.

### B. The Union Density <sup>3</sup>

American unions were also ineffective in organizing new members in the past. They were less enthusiastic in recruiting new members than working for existing members. Edsall (1984:151) once indicated, "... many key labor leaders have dismissed the failure of organized labor to grow as an irrelevant issue." **They claimed that what counts in the bargaining with the capital is the organized voice, not the size of the membership.**

Back in the early era of unionization, white male workers treated women and immigrants as potential strikebreakers, who would take their jobs whenever the former were laid off or on the strike. Only after the establishment of Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938, industrial unions began to organize blue-collar workers, including women and minority workers (Cornfield and Kim, 1994; Moody, 1988). Even that, because of union's

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<sup>3</sup> As I discussed earlier, many factors accounted for the decline of union organizations in the U.S. However this paper will focus on those related to union's organizing philosophy and strategy.



reluctance to get involved in some ethnic or gender issues, the unions were also seen as representing a 'special interest' group (Piore, 1991). Unions' appeal to the minorities was thus limited. As a result of the unions' hostility to workers with different race or gender, employers succeeded in dividing the labor force along the gender-ethnic lines in the past. They hired female and immigrant workers as strike breakers or cheap labor. This strategy created continuous tensions among workers with different gender, ethnicities, or nationalities (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich, 1982; Piven and Cloward, 1977).<sup>4</sup>

Feeling pleased with several successful bargaining cases in major industries, such as automobile and steel in the 1930s, American unions were slow to expand their membership pool in service industries or white-collar occupations when the organizing effort reached a saturation point within those smokestack industries (Brown, 1983; Fiorito and Greer, 1982). Unions were also unsuccessful in organizing blue-collar workers in smokestack industries outside the frost-belt areas. With the change of economic structure and deindustrialization in the mid-West and North-Eastern smokestack industries, both the numbers of blue-collar workers and unionized enterprises were diminishing (Edwards and Podgursky, 1986). The customary emphases on job-level rights and benefits on senior union members, the production of the economic boom after World War II, made the union's bargaining and organizing work even more difficult during the era of economic recession (Locke and Thelen, 1995). The decline of the percentage of organized workers became a long-term nightmare. With a membership of less than 16% of the total labor force the unions could only represent a very small part of public opinions, not to mention to have any influences on American politics.

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<sup>4</sup> The author certainly recognized that American employers' hostile attitudes and other anti-union strategies were also detrimental to unionization in the U.S. Unions' organizing effort was often in a significant part offset by employers (Griffen, Wallace, and Rubin, 1986; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie, 1986). Creating conflicts among the labor was only one of them. Segregating labor markets into different modes of control further undermined the solidarity of American workers (Edwards, 1979).

Previous discussion intended to exemplify American unions' weaknesses resulted from their organizing ideology. The focus on economism turned to be fatal when political and economic factors were out of unions' control and changed to their disadvantages. In the following I shall use the case of the Eastern Airline machinists' strike to prove the points I made above.

### **III. Background of the Strike**

#### **A. Brief History of Eastern Airlines before 1987**

Upon the time the strike began, Eastern Airlines was operating in 27 states in the U.S. and in most Latin American countries. It was rated as the seventh largest major carrier in the nation in terms of operating revenues. The company was established in 1929 by a World War I American pilot. Eastern had operating losses every year since 1979, one year after the deregulation of airline industry. It got a break in 1984 when the carrier turned out some profits. By then, the three representative unions in Eastern, IAM (International Association of Machinists; representing machinists, ramp workers, and ground crews), TWU (the Transport Workers Union; representing flight attendants), and ALPA (Airline Pilots Association; representing pilots) already agreed with the concessions of wage and fringe benefits several times. Workers claimed that they have contributed about \$1.5 billions to Eastern and were asked for paycuts six times for the past 13 years before the takeover by Lorenzo. Texas Air purchased Eastern for only \$277 millions (cash values) along with other ways of payment in 1986 (*Business Week*, 1989, March 27).

#### **B. The takeover by Frank Lorenzo and conflicts with machinists**

Workers at Eastern did not welcome Lorenzo's takeover of the company. The chair of IAM at Eastern, Charles Bryan, claimed the selling 'a bad

deal' and termed Lorenzo as a person of doing 'union busting' (*AFL-CIO News*, 1986, March 1). After the buying-out, Lorenzo immediately asked greater wage concessions than workers expected and his attitude was even more intransigent in bargaining. He reduced the number of machinists from 12,000 to 8,500 at Eastern in just one year after his takeover.

The unions seemed not to know how tough Lorenzo was at that time. In fact he was selected as one of the "America's toughest bosses" by *Fortune* magazine in the issue of February 27, 1989. His picture appeared on the cover in that very issue. Lorenzo, then the president of Texas Air Corporation, was rather infamous from the labor's point of view. After taking over Continental in 1983, Lorenzo immediately filed for bankruptcy after the unions refused for wage cuts. He later succeeded in turning the company into a nonunion shop with the company restructuring. Since then Continental had the lowest labor cost in the industry, but still lost money almost every year.

The relation between Lorenzo and the Eastern unions deteriorated when the former asked about \$150 million worth of wage concessions from machinists. IAM believed that they have endured Lorenzo enough and refused any further wage cuts. Instead, it asked for 8% wage increase for its members to compensate for the previous wage concessions. Both sides refused to back down from their respective proposals.

The unions' rejection of the Eastern deal was not totally economic oriented. They indicated little faith in Lorenzo to keep Eastern a strong competitor in the business (*The Washington Post National Weekly*, 1989, March 20-26). For instance, at one time in 1988 Lorenzo tried but failed to sell profitable Eastern shuttle (flying among Washington D.C., New York, and Boston) to another Texas Air subsidiary.<sup>5</sup> Later of the year Eastern sold several gates in Philadelphia airport to Midway Airlines. As some experts indicated, after deregulation the control of departure gates and take-off and landing slots are particularly crucial for the survival of a major airline. Air-

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<sup>5</sup> The shuttle was eventually sold to Donald Trump in 1989, four months after the machinists' strike started.

lines without the control of gates in important hubs could not even operate. Thus, from labor's eyes, Lorenzo's selling of gates to other airlines could not possibly be seen as a sincere move to keep the company intact and strong as he promised. He was actually downsizing the company. One day before Eastern filed for bankruptcy, the management transferred eight Eastern slots at National Airport (in Washington, D.C.) and another eight in La Guardia Airport (in New York) to Continental Airlines, also owned by Texas Air (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 17). These movements appeared to benefit the parent company by sacrificing Eastern.

### **C. The strike and final shutdown of Eastern**

Since they could not settle the issue with Lorenzo over the pay cuts, the unions filed a petition to National Mediation Board (NMB) to solve the dispute. The Board was not able to settle the issue either and set a 30-day cooling-off period. The Eastern management refused to accept this binding arbitration and kept selling the company's assets and operations. The unions was eager to find buyers at this time. Eastern workers controlled about one fifth of stockshare of the company, which was a trade-off they obtained for their wage concessions back in 1985. In fact this partial ownership provided only limited power for the unions in the company's policy-making, including selling the airlines (Moody, 1988: 190-191). The unions' search for a new buyer never succeeded.

Eighth thousand and five hundred machinists officially went on strike with the sanction of IAM and AFL-CIO on March 4, 1989. Lorenzo did not budge from his position either. He believed that the machinists would accept the concessions as soon as they faced the dilemma of going on strike or not. He sent out each Eastern pilot a videotape to call for their support and to stay in their jobs after the strike became effective. The majority of pilots rejected Lorenzo's plea. When 3,600 pilots and 8,000 flight attendants joined the machinists on the picket line, Lorenzo was left with few options to run the company effectively. He found enough replacements for the pilots but could not employ them. Their training was questioned by the court for safety rea-

sons. Eastern filed for bankruptcy protection five days after the strike. The strike went on until January 17, 1991 when the machinists officially called it off. One week later Eastern Airlines ended its total operations in the industry.

#### **IV. Explaining the Failure of the Eastern Strike**

For either the management or the unions, the final shutdown of total operations of Eastern Airlines was an unexpected result. Lorenzo and Texas Air believed that striking workers would eventually give in since the job market was tight after deregulation. The fear of unemployment should have shortened the duration of the strike. In the meantime, as a result of Lorenzo's intransigency the unions turned to push the government to step in the disputes and to force the management to go back to the bargaining table. Both sides seemed to miscalculate the situation. However it is the union workers who suffered the most from the strike.

Structural factors, mainly the deregulation, created difficult situations for both the management and the labor force. Severe competitions among carriers after air deregulation left few options for airline management to choose, including Eastern. Lorenzo's tough management style is surely another important cause of the strike and its destiny. However, these two factors were not sufficient to explain why the solid labor movement, with a just cause and the strong support of AFL-CIO, would fail. Below I explain the structural factor first, followed by the discussion of the new management style. Then I discuss the impacts of union decline and the lacking of public supports on the incidence.

##### **A. Structural Factors: Deregulation of the Airline Industry**

The regulations on flight routes, fares, and entrance of new carriers in airline industry were removed in 1978 under Carter administration. Considerations of efficiency and costs reduction for consumers were, among others, two important reasons behind the policy change. Deregulation indeed bene-

fitted the consumers according to many studies. For instance, one of them showed that airline fares declined by about one-fifth ten years after deregulation, which was equal to \$100 billions of savings for American passengers (*The Economist*, 1989, June 24; see also Keeler, 1991). Customers' complaints decreased. And they have more choices to select the carriers or flight connections than before.

The deregulation made the American flight market very competitive, too. Even foreign countries felt the pressure to provide better service and lower fares to compete for more travellers (Kasper, 1988). The fare competition became extremely severe. Some airlines cut fares so low that they could not even cover the fuel and other variable costs. The purpose was to maintain the market share. Based on some statistics, labor costs contribute to the largest item in almost all the major airline carriers (*The New York Times*, March 28b, 1989). It is not surprising that many American carriers had to reduce labor expenses to maintain a reasonable debt-and-equity ratio. New entrants in the market could pay lower wages to their junior pilots and machinists. In contrast, carriers with longer operating history strongly felt the pressure since their contracts with unions observed seniority. Financially-weak carriers, such as TWA, Pan Am, and Eastern, particularly felt the heat of competition. The necessity for cutting labor costs was even more urgent than in other companies. Concessions of wages, overtime pay, and other fringe benefits became common experiences for airline workers (Peoples, 1990). Eastern was no exception. Fare wars on major routes among airlines were cited as the main reasons for the losses of the whole industry (*AFL-CIO News*, 1986, Jan. 25).

Since many carriers continued to have problems maintaining a financial balance, some were eventually merged by other companies (Vietor, 1994: 82). For instance, in the same year when Lorenzo bought Eastern Airlines, he also acquired another two companies: People's express and Frontier. Mergers also occurred in other major carriers. The main architect of airline deregulation, the economist Alfred Kahn, once resented so many mergers after deregulation and the absolute failure to apply anti-trust law to merger cases

(1988; see also Williams, 1993). According to the report of Economic Policy Institute, the airline industry experienced 51 mergers and over 150 bankruptcy filings in twelve years after deregulation (*AFL-CIO News*, 1991, Feb. 4). And up to 1990, more than 150 airlines went out of business (*AFL-CIO News*, 1991, June 10). The sky was controlled by eight biggest airline companies. In combination they carried about 90% of passengers. Since merger or takeover usually meant nullification of previous union contracts, labor unions had asked the Congress to mandate labor protection provisions whenever airlines being merged or acquired (*AFL-CIO News*, 1986, June 14). They did not succeed. Before the deregulation, the former Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) usually required these provisions in merger cases. There are no similar agencies or regulations after the deregulation.

Several aspects of labor market outcomes were affected because of deregulation. First, as I identified before, the concessions in wages and other fringe benefits were prevalent in almost all carriers, for all positions (Cappelli, 1985; Cappelli and Harris, 1985). Secondly, nonunionized airlines rapidly increased (Moore, 1986), which put more pressure on unionized ones to reduce labor costs. According to some survey results, up to 1985 about 40,000 employees lost their jobs and were displaced since deregulation in 1978 (*AFL-CIO News*, 1985, Oct. 5). While the impacts of deregulation were industry-wide, the airline unions still adopted a company-by-company bargaining strategy (Rosen, 1988: 16). Labor power was clearly weakened by this practice in the industry. Eastern workers, however, were not the only victims of the deregulation.

## **B. Inside the Organization: The Eastern Management Style**

In Lorenzo's brief career in the airline industry, he had filed two bankruptcies and had three acquisitions (*The New York Times*, 1989, Aug. 10). He was a pioneer in providing discount and peanut fares and using bankruptcy to dissolve union. He once intended to buy TWA too but was successfully stopped by the airlines' workers (*AFL-CIO News*, 1986, March 1).

After the takeover of Eastern, Lorenzo did not reserve his criticisms to IAM. He once called Eastern “. . . a money loser mired in endless labor disputes” (*Newsweek*, March 20, 1989). In public, Lorenzo argued that Eastern was not compatible in the market since the wages were too high for ground workers. However, according to a statistic compiled by *The New York Times*, both machinists and ramp workers in Eastern were paid less than those in Delta, Northwestern, United, and USAir (1989, March 7 and 28b). Continental Airlines had the lowest wage level among those compared but still lost money. Actually Lorenzo was not afraid of the strike by machinists at Eastern. He even sought to use the opportunity to break down the machinist union through filing bankruptcy, which he used in Continental back in 1983. In that case he successfully broke the contract with unions and displaced union workers after bankruptcy. However, since then, the House had made it illegal for bankrupted firms to break previous labor contracts. Lorenzo was thus unable to decertify the Eastern unions after bankruptcy. Facing tough unions in Eastern, Lorenzo then tried to cut down the operation size. Even before filing for Eastern bankruptcy, Lorenzo had been selling Eastern assets for months. Texas Air wound up to be the biggest winner at Eastern’s expenses (*Business Week*, 1989, March 20; *The New York Times*, 1989, March 20).

The selling of Eastern computer reservation system is a good example of showing Lorenzo’s intentions to downsize Eastern, besides what I indicated in previous paragraphs. As airlines analysts indicated, due to tremendous competition for customers on fares and flight connections after deregulation, computer reservation system is important for major airlines to survive in the market (*Time*, May 15, 1989). However, Eastern sold Texas Air its computer reservation system for \$100 millions with an interest rate of 6%, which would not be due in 25 years. Later, Texas Air sold half of the reservation system to GM for \$250 millions. Lorenzo’s attempt to downsize the difficult business (i.e., Eastern) and to benefit its holding company (Texas Air) was clear.

As I indicated earlier, Eastern workers did not welcome Lorenzo’s buying of the company. The terms used to call or to describe Lorenzo by



union officials included “corporate buccaneer”, “corporate raider”, “absolute contempt” to the unions, being “interested in making a quick profit”, “a slave to greed and power”, “a bird of passage”, “an interloper”, “not part of the Eastern Airlines family”, “a money man, not an airline man”, “dismantling our airline”, “incompetent, conniving, greedy airline wrecker”. There was seldom a boss who could win so many bad names by his/her employers during such a short employment relationship. The unions described Lorenzo’s management style as “upstreaming” or “milking”, which means to support the parent company by stripping newly-purchased ones. The then President of AFL-CIO, Lane Kirkland once said about Lorenzo’s management style: “. . . (choosing) to purchase a good company and strip its assets, rather than operate it fairly and decently” (*AFL-CIO News*, 1989, March 4). The workers at Eastern Airlines were determined to have Lorenzo leave Eastern when they stood up the picket line. Some union leaders indicated that “(a) t a certain point it (the strike) became a fight for dignity” and “(i) t is no longer just going to work and collecting a paycheck” (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 6b).<sup>6</sup>

Unions were not alone in criticizing Lorenzo’s management style. Even some officials in the Bush Administration had disagreements with Lorenzo’s handling of the labor issues. For instance, the then Secretary of Transportation Samuel Skinner once said that “. . . Mr. Lorenzo has obviously not got the trust and admiration of his employees” (*Time*, 1989, March 13). He was also cited as saying that “. . . (t) he problem (with Eastern strike) is compounded here because of Mr. Lorenzo’s actions and his conduct and the fact he has no rapport with his workers” (*The Washington Post National Weekly*, 1989, March 20-26). Observing the bitter strike, the head of the Antitrust Division of Justice Department suggested a tougher stand on mergers by airlines (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 8). The unions seemed to suc-

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<sup>6</sup> Feeling so bitter in their experiences of dealing with Lorenzo, labor unions watched closely of his any movements in the business. In one case, unions and some congressional members had even blocked a bid by Lorenzo to open a new carrier, Friendship Airlines, by claiming that “. . . he is not fit to win and operate another airline” (*AFL-CIO News*, 1993, April 12).

ceed in portraying Lorenzo as an unwelcome chief of the Eastern. In an interview program aired on March 8, 1989, Lorenzo was labeled as “. . . (these days) the most hated man in the United States” by the famous anchor, Barbara Walters.

### **C. Unfavorable Political Environment**

As I discussed above, all major carriers experienced the heat of competition and did various personnel adjustments and costs reduction after deregulation. Eastern was no exception. The tough stance of Eastern brought in the strike of its employees instead of concessions as Lorenzo would have expected. The intentions for Texas Air to downsize Eastern and the intransigence of the management were well documented and publicized. Both the structural and organizational factors might be seen as causes of the Eastern strike. They cannot explain why the strike failed, however.

I indicated earlier that, unlike the situations in most other Western countries, the American industrial relations are extensively regulated by various laws or procedures. In fact the Administration had rather strong power to intervene in labor disputes through different agencies or executive orders. In the Eastern case, clearly knowing the importance for the state to intervene in the controversy, both AFL-CIO and Eastern unions made many attempts in this regard. But the Bush Administration consistently held a non-involvement attitude. Several of the results could prove his unwillingness to help settle down the strike. First, on March 3rd, 1989, one day before the start of the union-scheduled strike, Bush refused to appoint an emergency board to get both sides to talk, even though it was recommended to him by National Mediation Board, his own governmental agency. Then on March 15 the House approved a bill calling for Bush to appoint an emergency board to help resolve the strike. Bush vetoed that bill and the House failed to overrule the veto. Later, the House voted to authorize the Transportation Department to block an airline takeover or leveraged buyout for safety or other reasons. This was also vetoed by Bush, too.

Feeling powerless to the government's 'neutral' attitude, ALPA of

Eastern once reported a 'Texas connection' between Lorenzo and Bush since a top White House airline-interest lobbyist worked for Texas Air before. The union also learned that Eastern even acquired a \$120 millions military services contract despite its labor problems (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, March 5). Some people observed that Bush vetoed the recommendation by NMB or House decisions as a way to show his presidential power after he lost the nomination of John Tower as the Secretary of Defense in the Congress hearing (Walsh, 1994:153). If it was true, the Eastern strike became a victim of an unrelated battle.

Pro-business and anti-union are rather appropriate words to characterize the atmosphere in the Republican presidencies since 1980. The political environments were clearly unfavorable, or even hostile, during the 12 years. The firing of 11,300 striking air traffic controllers (public employees) by President Reagan is a good example. In that case, the union (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization; PATCO) asked for a pay raise for its members and was declined by Reagan. The issue, however, received little public acceptance (Northrup, 1984). Therefore, with a mandate from American people as a result of his overwhelmed victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan administration simply ignored unions' voice. He refused to have any negotiations and finally made the firing decision (Edsall, 1984). It also resulted in the dissolution of PATCO.

Relatively speaking, the Democrats-controlled Congress was clearly more supportive of the labor's cause in the Eastern strike. In addition to requiring Bush administration to appoint an emergency board to help settle the labor issue in Eastern, it passed a bill to ask the Department of Transportation to disqualify from airline transactions anyone who had filed for bankruptcy on two occasions. Frank Lorenzo certainly fitted the description. However, both the moves of the House were vetoed by Bush and the former could not find enough votes to overturn the vetoes. Other than these, the Congress, especially the Senate, offered little help to the unions. This fact reflected a point made earlier that the unions are losing their influences on Democrats legislators, especially on Senators (Dark, 1996).

Some decisions or movements taken by the court also had consequences for the strike. For instance, the court still allowed Eastern to draw a significant amount of cash from the court's escrow account when the company's normal operations were almost totally shutdown (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, Nov. 26). During the strike, the unions appealed to the bankruptcy court several times to investigate Lorenzo's upstreaming movements. They pointed out that Lorenzo has stripped valuable assets of Eastern and benefited its parental company, Texas Air (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, March 19). However, the court did not agree with the union's claims only until the early 1990. A judge was quoted as saying that ". . . (i)t's time to change the captain of Eastern's crew " (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, April 30). By that time Lorenzo already sold many valuable assets of Eastern, including airplane fleets, airport gates, and the computer reservation system. It also weakened the effectiveness of the strike when the court ordered strikers not to picket in airports in Boston and New York (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 25). Federal bankruptcy court criticized IAM in public after the latter campaigned to ask travel agents not to take Eastern reservations (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, July 23).

All in all, as we looked up these records, the political environment clearly worked against the unions' wishes. The union leaders could get little political support despite their constant pleas or demonstrations during the striking period. Their picketing strategies were closely watched by the court and by the mass media as I will discuss next, and most of them were simply prohibited. Near the end of the Eastern strike, a vice-president of AFL-CIO said that, ". . . in the U.S., the hostility of employers, government, and court has reached a level of intensity not seen for a half century or more" (*AFL-CIO News*, 1990, Jan. 8).

#### **D. The Lack of Public Support**

As I discussed earlier in the paper, the concentration on income security in exchange for by the unions isolated both the general public and the working class. In general, the public attitudes towards unions were not favorable

in the United States. The percentage of public approval of labor organizations has been declining over years (Goldfield, 1987:35). To examine the influences of public support on the Eastern strike, I focus on two aspects: mass media and the reactions of general public and the working class.

### 1. Mass Media

It was documented that American news media tended to portray the union as strike-prone and always asking for better wages or fringe benefits regardless of business conditions (Puette, 1992). Unions are seen as selfish (Edsall, 1984:172). Upon it occurred, the Eastern strike attracted intensive news coverage of the three wireless TV stations and major newspapers, like *The New York Times*. However, most of their reporting focused on, owing to the strike, the inconvenience to services in some small towns and local airlines, travellers' complaints about the cancellation of flights, and their threats to sue the company (e.g., *The New York Times*, 1989, March 19b). These reports certainly caused some uneasiness for airline travellers and portrayed the union as the traffic destructor.

The News media emphasized the possible consequences of a massive transportation strike. For instance, *The New York Times* had more than once indicated that railroads were at risk being picketed by workers feeling sympathetic towards the machinists at Eastern (1989, March 6a). In fact, even before the strike union leaders privately acknowledged that picketing other airlines and the railroads could alienate travellers and reduce public supports (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 3). In fact both the normal flight schedules and other transportation routes were little affected in the beginning of the strike. The possible damages for the Eastern strike to the general public was certainly exaggerated to some extent by the mass media. These kinds of reporting apparently misguided the public the union's real cause behind the strike.

Some of the reports even misled the public. The mass media once cited words from the management that baggage handlers were paid \$45,000 annually, which was rather high for this kind of job in the industry (*AFL-CIO*

*News*, April 1a, 1989). However, Eastern baggage handlers were paid only \$15.6 per hour. To earn a payment of \$45,000 workers had to work 2,885 hours a year, equal to 55 hours a week (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 7). The Eastern strike was mainly organized by the machinists union, which is affiliated with IAM. It was established as a craft union in 1888, which was seen as one of the most militant labor organizations in the earlier years of its establishment in the U.S. (Montgomery, 1987). During the period of strike, *The New York Times* had an article which portrayed IAM as “. . . one of the most militant and left-leaning unions in the nation” and indicated that “. . . the union has a history of electing progressive leader” and has “. . . a reputation as particularly cohesive” (1989, March 5). These descriptions seemed to refer to the Eastern strikers as a group of militant, prone-strike workers. In another article the newspaper also portrayed the previous union president of IAM, William W. Winpisinger, “. . . a blunt, sometimes brash, man who has called himself a ‘seat-of-the-pants’ socialist”. Some business magazines also criticized the National Mediation Board as too pro-union in Eastern’s case, for example (*Fortune*, 1989, July 3). An airline bond analyst was once quoted as saying that “. . . Eastern was a high-cost, low-yield airline with a lousy service reputation and militant unions” (*Business Week*, 1989, March 27). These reports did not mention that only half of the strikers belonged to the machinist union. Over half of those on the picket line were members of another two labor unions, ALPA and TWU. The news media did not emphasize that before the strike those ‘militant’ workers already made many wage and benefit concessions under the demand of the company.

## **2. The Lack of Support from the General Public and the Working Class**

During the striking period, the news media also conducted several polls to show the public opinion about the strike. Washington Post reported that 46% polled Americans said that the union was right and 27% sided with the management (*AFL-CIO News*, 1989, April 1b). A poll conducted by *Newsweek* showed that 57% respondents siding with Eastern machinists and

39% of them did not follow the strike at all (1989, March 20).

In the past, American public rarely approved the strike. For instance, a poll conducted by Roper Organization revealed that, when first learning about a strike, 28% of respondents would side with unions and 21% would side with the employers (*AFL-CIO News*, 1993, Feb. 1). The general public especially had little trust in unions' leaders (Edsall, 1984:172) and believed that the unions had monopoly power when pursuing their 'members' interests' (Lipset, 1986b). Judging from these figures, even though the Eastern strike obtained higher sympathy from the American public than the management, the unions did not have enough public sentiments to backup their efforts to push President Bush to act or push the Congress to be more aggressive in their causes.

As I indicated earlier, AFL-CIO was hesitated in calling for picketing other airlines and the railroads when the strike started. In fact, the Eastern unions received little help from the rank and file in the same industry. Only a few unions, such as the Teamsters at Pan Am, verbally threatened to stage a sympathy strike to support Eastern workers (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 19a). Some unions indicated to support the Eastern strike by slowing down their routine work procedures for so-called 'safety reasons'. These moves would be hard to be prohibited by the court, but would produce some pressure for the government to act. However, the outcomes were insignificant by any standards. The support for the Eastern strike was certainly not as high as the Eastern workers would have expected. Most of the time, they were alone on the picket line.

## **V. Conclusions—The Impacts of American Unionism**

On August 9, 1990, Lorenzo sold his stocks in Continental Holding, Inc. (previously Texas Air) to Scandinavian Airlines System for \$30.5 millions and agreed not to work in the airline business for seven years (*The New York Times*, 1990, Aug. 10). On January 24th, 1991, the machinists finally called the end of a nearly 23-month strike against Eastern. One week later Eastern

shut down its whole operations. Clearly it is the Eastern workers and American labor union who lost the most in the strike.

When the strike at Eastern began in 1989, the labor organization was looking to reestablish the strength of union movement on the shoulders of those striking machinists, pilots, and flight attendants (*The New York Times*, 1989, March 3). Their expectation was understandable since it has been a long time since they had such a well-publicized, well-organized, and united labor movement against a big company under the Republican Administrations. Upon the time Eastern machinists went on strike, workers at Pittston were also picketing against a mining company. Both incidences were seen as a renewal of union power in the 1980s (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1989, March 22). However, according to an article published in *The New York Times* (1989, March 9), “. . . even if the machinists and pilots managed to win (the Eastern strike), their victory is not likely to reverse the long-term trend away from union power.” What this paper tried to demonstrate is that: there were deeper reasons for the failure of the Eastern strike than economic or organizational factors. The workers lost mainly because they could not obtain enough supports from the legislature, the public, and the working class under a hostile political environment. Since the American unions had lost both lobbying power and public support for such a long time, Bush could take a tough stand against unions without risking his own political resources. The solidarity claimed by the leaders of AFL-CIO in the Eastern case did not transform into a real power for American labor organizations. The failure of the strike is a result of the persistent decline of union strength in the United States. The decline is rooted, among other factors, in the bargaining and organizing ideology of American unions. As Fantasia (1988) indicated, American workers were no different from workers in other Western industrial countries. Institutional factors, including labor laws (e.g., Taft-Hartley Act) and the practices of labor management and collective bargaining, played important roles at limiting workers' solidarity. Transforming these structural obstacles into advantages also requires a new philosophy of unionization by American labor organizations.



Clearly, winning the support from the state is crucial for the future of unionization in the U.S. under the current system. The political alliance with the Democratic Party apparently was not stable for labor's causes (Davis, 1986). Feeling unsatisfied with the political situation, Winpisinger, with other radical union leaders, once called for a ". . . new progressive alliance to push Democrats to the Left" (Green, 1980: 237-238). No matter which strategy will be adopted by the unions, how to obtain substantial public acceptance is surely a more fundamental issue. As the emphasis on economism has been criticized by historians, sociologists, and radical economists and alienated both the general public and the working mass, American unions need to seriously rethink their organizing philosophy. As Brody put it, to be more effective, unions need to have ". . . some degree of disengagement from those American values", that is, individualism (1993:88) and then ". . . labor movement can perhaps do a better public-relations job explaining how its activities advance the cause of social justice" (p.92). A recent research showed that the connections between labor unions and other interest groups actually improved in the 1980s (Dark, 1996). It is surely a good sign. The newly-elected AFL-CIO chairperson—John Sweeney—was famous for organizing white-collar workers (*Time*, 1995, Oct. 30 and *U.S. News & World Report*, 1995, Nov. 6). Being fully aware of the adversities faced by American unions for the past two decades, he and union leaders must have been thinking hard about how to lead American workers effectively in the future.

Chin-fen Chang is the associate research fellow of the Institute of Sociology, Preparatory Office, at Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. She had her Ph.D. from the Department of Sociology at The Ohio State University. Her recent publications include "Economic Rewards and the Determination Process for Female Workers in Export-Oriented Industries in the 1980s—Using Taiwan as an Example" (*Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, April, 1996) and "Interrelations of Industrial Structures between Core and Peripheral Economies" (*EurAmerica: A Journal of European and American Studies*, June, 1996). Dr. Chang is currently working on a project which studies the reactions of unions toward privatization of state enterprises and the changing employment status of displaced workers.

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## 為何團結未必是力量 ——對 1989 年美國東方航空公司罷工事件的分析

張晉芬

### 摘 要

本文是以美國東方航空公司罷工失敗的例子，說明當勞工組織整體力量衰弱後，個別工會本身的團結並不足恃。由於不滿資方的工資縮減政策及經營方式，美國東方航空公司機師工會於 1989 年發起罷工，共有 8500 人參加。隨後由於飛行員和空服員的加入，使得參與罷工的人數高達 21000 人。在資方不願接受仲裁、拒絕回到談判桌的情況下，行政部門的干預變成勞工所可依賴的最後屏障。由於缺乏民意及國會有利的支持，以及無法推動其他運輸工會採取同情性罷工的情況下，東方航空的工會終究未能促使親資方的共和黨政府採取對其有利的行動。罷工約於兩年後結束。東方航空公司的員工除了失業之外，一無所獲。作者主要指出，解除飛航管制及資方的強硬態度分別是促使罷工產生的遠因和近因；然而罷工的失敗，其實是反映工會力量的長期積弱不振。雖有總工會的認可和強力支持，但實質幫助卻相當有限。長久以來，美國工會所標榜的個人主義和經濟主義造成工會會員的比例下降及勞工大眾的疏離，並且也使其和政治運作機器的距離愈來愈遠。一方面工會對行政及立法部門的影響力不足，另一方面對於會員和一般大眾也缺乏號召力，無法累積成社會壓力。因此即使參與此次罷工的勞工具具有相當的決心，也表現了難得的團結，但最後仍然是功虧一簣。

**關鍵詞：**去管制化、罷工、工人團結、工會衰落、東方航空公司、共和黨政府、傾資方。