

Safe landing

All systems 'go' for Ray Federspiel — he's back in control

By Jackie Klein
staff writer

RAY FEDERSPIEL talked to airplanes from a control tower for 13 years. He's still a tower operator, but he now talks to auto mechanics.

Federspiel, 39, who lives in Southfield with his wife and two children, is one of 13,000 air traffic controllers fired by the government in August after a three-day walkout.

But he is among the few lucky ones. He found a job six weeks ago controlling auto repair operations in the service department of Seymour Cadillac in Detroit.

Federspiel, who was a vice president with the Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization (PATCO) a year before the strike, is now a non-union employee.

His boss, Samuel Seizert, said he took a chance when he hired Federspiel. There was some flak from the union at first, he said. But things are working out better than expected.

"I'LL TRY anything," Seizert said. "I needed a good tower operator who was used to a high-pressure job. I thought about the air traffic controllers who are out of work and were discriminated against because of union affiliations."

"I called PATCO and asked the union to send me its three best men. Two air controllers I interviewed seemed depressed and reluctant to start a new career. But Ray was enthused. He knew the challenge, and he has learned quickly."

With 11 mechanics repairing 50-60 cars a day, order writers constantly calling, salesmen wanting their customers' work done first and customers wanting their cars back pronto, Federspiel has a lot of juggling around to do, Seizert said.

Federspiel admits he's not a car buff and has much to learn about the mechanics of automobiles. But he knows service is only as good as the tower operator.

He works 12 hours a day. But as an air controller, he said, he's used to

"crazy hours." And he's glad to be employed again.

"I WAS out of work five months," he said with a look of pain on his face. "After the so-called strike, I expected to be not working for only three weeks. I kept wondering how long it would last."

"I was an air traffic controller for 13 years — five years in the Detroit area. I had no other skills."

"When I lost my job in August, my wife had to go back to work. It wasn't easy having her support the family while I stayed home and washed floors and did the laundry."

Federspiel had to withdraw money from his retirement fund in order to survive, he said. His wife is still working, and it's hard on his kids, he said. But they've gotten used to fewer activities outside the home and living with less.

Federspiel is one of 100 area air controllers who have sued federal agencies. The controllers are seeking to be rehired with full back pay and benefits.

But, said Federspiel, even if PATCO members win their case, he's not sure he would resume his career.

"I'm very fortunate that Seizert took a chance on me. The day goes by fast and, though I'm still in the learning process, I can take the pressure."

"The stress is different from what I experienced as an air traffic controller."

"I used to have a constant feeling of immediacy. It's different when a pilot says he wants to get his airplane on the ground than when a customer says he wants to get his car back."

"AS AN air controller, if I made a mistake I could kill 200 people. I enjoyed my work, but I worried."

"I knew if I made the wrong decision and didn't correct it, it could cause a disaster. Like other controllers, I was under great stress."

"The longer you're away from the job, the harder it is to go back," he said last week. "I wonder how many air controllers could cope after being away



At Seymour Cadillac's control tower, Federspiel keeps track of incoming cars, mechanic workloads and customer complaints. It's a pres-

sure-packed job, but less stressful than his old one. "As an air controller, if I made a mistake I could kill 200 people," he says.

for six months. It could be a choice between lasting till you're 60 or being burned out at 45."

Because of the stress involved, few air controllers make it to retirement after 25 years, Federspiel said. Many suffer serious health and psychological problems, he said.

But he was proud of being one of 13,000 controllers contributing 25 percent of the gross national product by moving aircraft, he said.

The public has been misinformed about the "strike," which he refers to as "withholding of service," Federspiel said.

"The media gave the impression we just wanted a \$10,000 raise. What didn't come across was that we were working with antiquated equipment and under poor conditions. I'm making less money now than I was then. But that's not the point."

"MANY CONTROLLERS have alcohol, medical, psychological and marital problems. When they got older, they slowed down and could no longer do the job."

"The government was supposed to retrain them for another career. But this never happened."

In 1979, a federal study of air controller conditions was conducted, Federspiel said. But, he said, the situation got worse, and the government never addressed the problems.

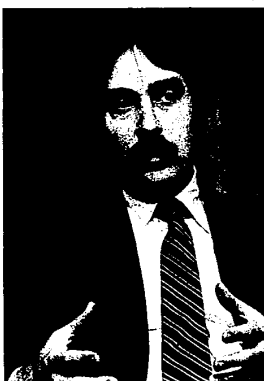
"When you work for a monopoly, it's the only game in town. Air controllers work for the government and have a right to safe working conditions and fair wages. But it's considered illegal for federal employees to strike."

"We don't feel we were on strike. We did some informational picketing. We believe the government planned for this since the 1970 air controllers' slowdown."

But he doesn't have much time to think about that right now. He's too busy controlling auto mechanics from his new tower and learning about lube jobs and sparkplugs.

"All systems go on runway three," an auto mechanic said to Federspiel when he finished repairing a Cadillac.

"They kid me like that all the time," Federspiel said with a smile.



'I used to have a constant feeling of immediacy. It's different when a pilot says he wants to get his airplane on the ground than when a customer says he wants to get his car back.'
— Ray Federspiel



Last summer, Federspiel was on the picket line with other Detroit area PATCO members. He expected to be out of work three weeks, the Southfield resident recalls. But the weeks stretched to months. Then came an unexpected phone call from a Detroit car dealer and a chance to work.

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Mindy Saunders

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