WASHINGTON, June 19, 2003 Air traffic control has become a flashpoint of the Bush administration's effort to contract out hundreds of thousands of federal jobs to the private sector.

Both the House and Senate voted last week to forbid further privatization of the air traffic system, after vigorous lobbying by the controllers' unions, supported by a group representing private pilots. Soon, negotiators for the two houses will iron out differences in the bill to which the measures were attached. The underlying bill authorizes the Federal Aviation Administration to spend money for the next few years; the House version is for $58.9 billion over four years, and the Senate version is for $43.5 billion over three years.

The administration is threatening to veto the bill over the privatization provision. On June 11, it announced that "restrictions are unnecessary and would hinder" the ability of the aviation agency to manage the air traffic control system. In May, the administration said that of 850,000 government jobs that it says could be handled by private contractors, it would like to open 15 percent of them to private-sector competition in the current fiscal year, which ends on Sept. 30. Officials have said they would like to find some of those jobs at the F.A.A.

More than 200 airports, mostly small, already have "contract towers" with privately employed air traffic controllers, and as the aviation agency has bought new air traffic computers, it has bought maintenance contracts on some of that equipment from the vendors, rather than using its own technicians.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton declared that the air traffic function was "inherently governmental," but last year, the Bush administration reversed that position. The controllers argue that their jobs cannot be done by private workers. "Air traffic control is too important to the public's safety to be sold off to the lowest bidder," John Carr, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, known as Natca, told a House panel in March.
Mr. Carr has repeatedly cited Sept. 11, 2001, when, he noted, government air traffic controllers safely brought 4,500 airplanes to landings around the country in just over two and a half hours. In contrast, he has argued, suicidal terrorists were able to seize four planes because of a privatized security system.

Senator Frank R. Lautenberg, Democrat of New Jersey, who sponsored the amendment in the Senate, said, "Your luggage is important enough to be screened by trained federal workers."

It is not clear, however, that the jobs of those controllers are the ones the Bush administration has in mind. Marion C. Blakey, administrator of the aviation agency, said in an interview that she would like to contract out the jobs of about 2,000 F.A.A. workers at 61 flight service stations, offices that give briefings to pilots on weather, special notices and temporary flight restrictions.

Those briefings cost the agency about $15 each, Ms. Blakey said, and the agency believes a private company can do the job for far less.

The flight service stations also provide some services to planes in flight, although they do not direct traffic the way that radar controllers do. They also serve corporate and military pilots, and sometimes airline pilots. A consultant who studied the issue for the aviation agency last year concluded that privatization was feasible.

Wally Pike, president of the union for the flight briefers, the National Association of Air Traffic Specialists, who opposes privatization, said that the $15 figure was not accurate and that part of the problem was that the flight service stations were top-heavy with management. With proper government investment, Mr. Pike said, costs would fall.

But the fate of Mr. Pike's members has been taken up by a more powerful organization, Natca, which represents about 15,000 radar controllers. Natca represents some contract tower controllers and is trying to get their jobs returned to government positions.

So far, there has been no public discussion at the administration level of privatizing the part of the air traffic system that has historically been the most
troublesome, the management. The most prominent criticisms of air traffic control are about its failures to modernize, an activity in which the rank-and-file controllers play only a small role.

The track record of privatized air traffic systems abroad is in dispute. The British National Air Traffic System got off to a bad start in 2001, when it could not handle all the traffic. It had to be bailed out by the government. In 2002, a privatized air traffic control system mishandled traffic in southern Germany, and a Boeing 757 cargo plane collided with a Tupolev passenger jet. Canada privatized its system in 1996. The private company cut costs for airlines, raised controllers' pay and modernized, but ran into financial trouble when the volume of air traffic fell after the Sept. 11 attacks.

In the House version of the authorization bill at issue, another amendment would require that in future airliner crashes, the National Transportation Safety Board's hearings be made available for viewing in the city where the plane originated and at its destination city. The amendment was sponsored by Representative Anthony Weiner, Democrat of Brooklyn, who complained that relatives of some of the passengers on American Airlines 587, which crashed in November 2001 in Queens, could not travel to Washington to attend the hearing. The safety board used to hold the hearings near the site of the crash, but now conducts them in Washington in a move to cut costs.