

Boeing Board of Directors onboards defense industry veteran as new CEO

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On August 8, Robert K. “Kelly” Ortberg was brought in as Boeing’s new president and CEO. Ortberg takes over the giant aircraft maker and military contractor amid dozens of near-disasters over the past eight months involving the company’s commercial planes and Starliner spacecraft and several investigations into the lack of quality control underlying these incidents.

Ortberg is the third head of the corporation in five years, replacing David Calhoun, who took over the corporation in January 2020 in the wake of the two 737 MAX 8 crashes that killed 346 men, women and children. Calhoun, who had been on Boeing’s board and is one of the many who bear responsibility for the the development and production of the deadly MAX 8, was elevated in an attempt to rehabilitate Boeing’s image after the crashes and, more importantly for the company’s stockholders, restore the airplane manufacturer’s profitability.

The selection of Ortberg by Boeing’s Board of Directors is another attempt to do the same, this time with someone not so mired in the criminality of the corporation’s upper management. Ortberg has also been brought in to strengthen Boeing’s ties to the US military-industrial complex.

Before Boeing, Ortberg was president and CEO of Rockwell Collins from 2013 to 2021. Rockwell Collins has its origins in shortwave radio manufacturing dating back to 1933. During World War II, its predecessor, Collins Radio Company, provided key radio and navigational equipment for the US military.

That work expanded in the post-war era, particularly during the race between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1960s to land a manned mission on the Moon. The company also moved into other fields, including flight control instruments and satellite voice transmissions.

Collins Radio Company was purchased by Rockwell

International in 1973, merging into Rockwell Collins. Since then, the company has focused solely on avionics for commercial planes and the defense industry.

Under Ortberg’s leadership, Rockwell Collins was purchased by RTX Corporation (formerly Raytheon Technologies) in 2018. It has since played a key role in the wars conducted by American imperialism, including the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Ortberg is tasked with reversing Boeing’s financial crisis. According to *Business Today*, Boeing has not had a profitable year since 2019 and has lost an estimated \$33.3 billion over that time. The company lost \$1.4 billion in the second quarter of 2024 alone and has lost a third of its value on the Dow Jones Industrial Average since January.

Boeing’s financial woes are in part due to numerous exposures of lax internal safety and quality control, first revealed by the MAX 8 crashes and highlighted again in January when a door panel blowout occurred on a MAX 9 jetliner shortly after takeoff. While no one died in that incident, it showed that Boeing management’s claims to have revitalized a “safety culture” within the company after the MAX 8 crashes were nothing but hot air.

Further blows came as numerous whistleblowers emerged in the wake of the January door blowout who directly contradicted Boeing’s claims that safety and quality were top priorities. They made clear that management’s actual priority was restoring the company’s profitability at any cost.

Among the most significant of the whistleblowers was John “Mitch” Barnett, who had opened a civil suit against Boeing, claiming that he was forced out of the company in 2017 after he raised multiple concerns about the safety of the 787 Dreamliner.

He had given two days of testimony in Charleston, South Carolina when he was found dead in his hotel parking lot the day he was slated to give his third day of testimony. While the county coroner declared that the death was a “self-inflicted gunshot wound,” news coverage afterward revealed that Barnett had told a family friend, “If anything happens to me, it’s not suicide.”

Two months later came the death of another whistleblower, Joshua Dean, also under circumstances that were never fully explained.

And in testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee, former Boeing quality engineer Sam Salehpour said that when he tried to raise safety issues internally, “I was told to ‘shut up,’ I was sidelined, I received physical threats.” He continued, “My boss said, ‘I would have killed someone who said what you said in a meeting.’”

More recently, a flight attendant who was on the MAX 9 during the blowout incident testified before the National Transportation Safety Board and asked, “How can we know this is not going to happen again and this is safe, because that should not have happened?”

Ortberg has also been brought in to suppress the growing militancy of Boeing workers. In July, 33,000 machinists who are in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) voted 99.9 percent to strike when their contract expires on September 12.

A strike would further undermine Boeing’s profitability, delaying even more the delivery of thousands of airplane orders on which Boeing is already years behind.

The IAM leadership, including District 751 President Jon Holden, is already preparing to betray the aspirations of the workers and collaborate with the company. In a “Statement on Boeing’s New CEO,” Holden wrote that Ortberg’s appointment “is a step in the right direction,” and that he “needs the support of the Machinists Union more than ever.”

The statement went on to say, “We want to be an integral part of Boeing’s vision for the future.” In other words, the IAM bureaucrats are ready and willing to suppress strike activity by the rank and file as long as they get their cut.

But Boeing machinists are in an immensely powerful

position to win their demands, including for a sharp rise in pay and the restoration of hundreds of safety and quality positions that have been eliminated over the past several years.

A strike would also be a significant blow against the Biden administration and the US war machine, especially given Ortberg’s defense background. Along with RTX, Boeing is a major contractor for the Department of Defense and is integral to American imperialism’s war plans against Russia and China, along with the ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. A strike at Boeing would significantly hinder these murderous campaigns.

While management is developing its strategy to impose a contract that will place the burden of years of losses on the backs of the workers, the rank and file must organize their own strike committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, at every workplace. They must also reach out to other sections of the working class, especially East Coast dockworkers, who are set to strike in September, as part of a mass campaign of industrial and independent political action aimed at ending capitalist ownership and the subordination of the lives of the producers and the safety of the public to corporate profit.



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