

“They treat us like modern day slaves”: Boeing workers speak from Washington state picket lines

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On the fourth day of the strike of 33,000 Boeing machinists across Washington, Oregon and California, workers on the picket lines remain determined to win their fight. Confidence is high among rank-and-file workers after their near unanimous rejection of the sellout agreement recommended by the leadership of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) last week.

The ongoing strike is an immense blow against the aerospace and defense industry giant, which is seeking to saddle its nearly \$60 billion in debt on the backs of its workforce. The effort of corporate management and the Biden-Harris administration to use the IAM apparatus to block a strike and impose the company's dictates were upset by the revolt of the rank-and-file, angered over more than a decade of frozen wages and other union-backed concessions.

The strike has become the high point of the class struggle in the United States. Workers across the country face the same falling wages, skyrocketing inflation, slashed pensions and benefits and collapsing living standards.

In response, the Biden administration, Boeing and the IAM bureaucracy are scrambling to contain and shut down the powerful strike as soon as possible. Today, federal mediators are joining the negotiation talks with IAM officials and Boeing executives at a downtown Seattle hotel. While IAM officials present the federal mediators as “neutral arbiters,” there have been countless cases, from railroad workers to dockworkers, where federal mediation has been the prelude to the imposition of pro-company contracts on workers.

What is happening is not “negotiations” but a conspiracy by the Boeing management, the IAM bureaucrats and government mediators against Boeing workers.

After workers rejected the IAM-backed contract proposal—which included a paltry 25 percent wage increase over four years, the elimination of the AMPP bonus, expanded overtime and the introduction of a new class of probationary employees—IAM officials sent out a survey Sunday claiming it wants to “ensure you are heard.”

As rank-and-file workers told WSWS reporters, the IAM

officials know exactly what workers want, above all inflation-busting raises, the return of pensions and more time off, but the union bureaucracy has ignored these demands.

In opposition to this conspiracy, a group of militant workers has set up the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee to outline a strategy for workers to fight until their demands are met and the democratic will of the membership carried out.

The committee issued a statement yesterday which declared in part:

The IAM officials want to relegate us to being extras in a movie they are directing. According to them, our only role is to “provide additional input to the bargaining committee” by filling out a survey, so union officials can supposedly “represent your interests effectively.”

If we leave it up to them, the IAM leaders and Boeing will move a few pennies here and there and force us to vote on a repackaged deal that is essentially the same as the one we just rejected.

For us to win, the membership must really take control of the next phase of the struggle. We formed the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee because we recognize the enormous power of workers on the shop floor and understand the need for rank-and-file workers, not the IAM bureaucracy, to control this struggle. Only in this way can we fight for and win what we need, not what the company, government and union bureaucrats say is affordable.

One significant aspect of the strike is the international character of Boeing's workforce. In addition to workers from the US, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* encountered workers on the picket lines from Laos, Cambodia, Philippines, India, Ethiopia, Mexico and many other countries.

The international unity of the working class demonstrated in this strike is a powerful rebuke to the fascistic campaign by Trump to whip up anti-immigrant hatred. It is also a rebuke to the endless promotion of nationalism and militarism by Harris and the Democrats.

When asked about Trump's efforts to incite racist violence against Haitian immigrants in Ohio, a Boeing worker with 16 years at the company, who has a background from India, said, "Yes, we have every kind of worker here, from all over the world. It's the leaders all over the world who are working to divide us."

He continued, "[Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi wants Hindus and Muslims fighting each other, and the same thing is happening here. The political leaders are disgusting. They do nothing for the people."

"The United States is a country where you can find immigrants from all over the world, from Asia, Europe, South America. It is a country of immigrants. But the policies of the government are wrong, and some of the politicians want to send immigrants back. The other side is sending missiles to kill Palestinians, and that is a bad policy too."

The worker spoke on how much Boeing workers have lost over the past 15 years. "The contract was not acceptable. It was not like the 25 percent raise they say but actually more like 11.6 percent because they took away our bonuses, and they did not give us anything else. We were supposed to bring our pension back, that is the big demand, plus a bonus. A lot of other unions, like Spirit, American Airlines, have gotten 40 percent. Why shouldn't we get it considering the cost of living?"

Another spoke angrily about the IAM leadership which has spent workers dues money. "The new headquarters they're building costs millions. They knew this contract was coming up, they could have saved that for the strike." Machinists on the picket line are only getting \$250 a week in strike pay, and only starting on the third week.

"They don't want to pay a penny out of the strike fund," one worker said, "that is why they want to shut the strike down as soon as possible."

By contrast, the IAM bureaucrats are still being paid their six-figure salaries. District 751 President Jon Holden's total compensation was more than \$225,000 in 2023 and International President Robert Martinez made \$668,000 last year.

"I know people who were let go on Wednesday and Thursday," one young worker told the WSWS. "Not laid off, but fired. That definitely told us where the company stood."

"Especially given how hard we work," the worker said. "Some of us are only making \$20 an hour and you can't live off that. We get taken for granted. I give my whole to this company, yet we get treated like modern day slaves. We have to fight. This is a fight we have to do together."

He continued, "The IAM basically said that this a good contract and to sign it when it was clearly not. There was no way we were going to sign it."

The "disconnect" between the IAM leadership and the rank-and-file has been noted by the corporate press. An article in Reuters reported that Holden assured the company on September 7 that a 25 percent wage increase would be enough to get the contract passed. When the deal was announced a day later, both the union apparatus and the company hailed the deal as historic.

But the outrage against the contract and the overwhelming call for a strike were a shock to both the union bureaucrats and the company.

In a call with Morgan Stanley analysts on Friday, Boeing CFO Brian West said, "What I'll tell you is that we've been working with the union leadership for a long time [and] we thought what we had was an unprecedented offer... and that's what was unanimously endorsed until it wasn't, because endorsement by the union leadership versus the members was quite a disconnect."

The US government cannot tolerate a prolonged strike at a key military supplier. Boeing has supplied Israel with more guided missiles and munitions than any other defense contractor, and it is critical to the escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

A report in *Aviation Week* noted: "Boeing's defense arm expects strong growth in Europe as the ongoing war in Ukraine and worries over geopolitical dynamics drive nations on the continent to ratchet up military spending."

That is why the Biden-Harris White House is intervening in the strike, and why the fight by Boeing and all workers to defend their social and democratic rights is bound up with the fight against war.

Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Jerry White spoke on the issue of war with workers on the picket line, noting that,

There is a real connection between the strike at Boeing and the wars abroad. And that's the fact that the United States government is giving Israel all the bombs it needs to kill Palestinians and now they are giving Ukraine all the bombs it needs for war with Russia, a war which would involve the United States.

Boeing happens to be making vast profits from these wars. Instead of using resources to provide affordable housing or education or healthcare, social security and pensions, \$1 trillion a year is spent on wars abroad.

The same corporate interests behind these wars are robbing pensions, robbing wages and then they go overseas to rob oil to make sure China can't challenge the US's global dominance.

Such dangers are why the fight to grow the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee is so important. Both parties, the Democrats and Republicans, are lurching to the right. The Boeing strike has the potential to be the beginning of an immense counter-offensive by the working class against the policies of fascism, dictatorship and world war. That struggle, however, can only be won if the rank-and-file workers are at the helm, and that "every worker must be engaged in this fight."

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