

Technical workers denounce union officials for rejecting strike action against Boeing

Cory Johnson
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Boeing union officials representing over 22,000 technical workers and engineers retreated from a threat to launch a February 3 strike against the aerospace giant as union members voted down the company's latest offer.

While the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) counted mail-in ballots that recorded a 51 percent rejection by technicians and a 62 percent rejection by engineers, top union officials met in Washington DC with members of their AFL-CIO counterpart—the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers—and staff officers for Vice President Al Gore, Labor Secretary Alexis Herman and Federal Aviation Administration head Jane Garvey.

To head off a strike or other job actions by the rank and file, SPEEA sought out Richard Barnes, head of the federal Mediation and Conciliation Services agency, to intervene and ask for emergency talks between the union and company. The negotiations will take place February 7 and 8.

The decision to call off the strike caused an explosion of anger from union members: “We should have been out on strike in December,” said one. “Our leaders do not have the strength to back up what they say.” At the company's plant in Renton, Washington, workers clapped and chanted, “Strike, strike, strike,” every half hour in the lead-up to the strike deadline. In the parking lot outside union headquarters in Southcenter enraged workers surrounded union officials and charged them with selling out.

Much has been made of the fact that out of a bargaining unit of 22,352 workers SPEEA holds a weak position with only 13,780 dues-paying members. But the past period has shown a rising tide of support for a struggle against the company. SPEEA called for a

rejection of the company's November 11 contract proposal that failed to provide guaranteed wage increases and no cuts in benefits. Engineers rejected the offer by 99 percent and technical workers followed with a 98 percent rejection.

After a new round of talks that concluded in January SPEEA announced that Boeing had made “significant” changes. But as news of the settlement leaked out to the rank and file and a mail-in ballot got under way, the bureaucracy was forced to shift its ground and admit that workers were insisting on higher raises, more guaranteed pay increases, a lump-sum bonus and no cuts in medical benefits. “Although we were able to get them most everything they were looking for on the second go-around, concessions had to be made and members have said it is not worth those concessions,” said SPEEA spokesman Bill Dugovich.

While Boeing has made set amounts of money for wages and bonuses available, they are applied unevenly in the form of merit pay. Under present conditions engineers make a minimum of \$35,000 per year and a maximum of more than \$105,000. Technical workers make a yearly minimum of \$20,500 and a maximum of \$88,200.

Workers are also well aware that Boeing expects to slash 18,600 jobs during the year 2000 in addition to its cuts in wages and benefits. This situation has led a significant section of workers to conclude that a struggle was necessary. During the last five months the union added 4,000 dues-paying members, nearly a 50 percent increase in its membership.

The position of the workers is further strengthened by another factor that was revealed by the Associated Press. The union represents “designated engineering representatives” who are “authorized by the Federal Aviation Administration to approve and certify changes

made to engineering design during production.” For Boeing to replace such workers in the event of a strike would be extremely difficult.

SPEEA executive director Charles Bofferding admitted that there was determination in the ranks when he said, “We think it would be a shame to not give the strength and power they have exerted already a chance to succeed and give them the contract they deserve.”

But as the deadline neared, SPEEA officials looked for a way out of the confrontation. In the week before the strike vote the union sent out an e-mail that said it would call a one-week protest strike in the event of a contract rejection. An uproar among the ranks, who saw in the proposal a retreat by the union, caused Bofferding to declare the proposal a mistake and call for the e-mail's retraction.

SPEEA's turn to the AFL-CIO and Clinton-Gore officials clearly demonstrated their opposition to unleashing a struggle against Boeing. The *Seattle Times* admitted as much, writing that the decision to bring in Barnes and the Mediation and Conciliation Services “signals that SPEEA is gambling on politicians—not disgruntled workers—to wield the most potent pressure against Boeing.”

Bofferding announced, “The Boeing company is a very political company, and this is a campaign year,” making clear SPEEA, like the AFL-CIO, is interested in a horse-trade with Gore—to boost the vice president's election campaign in return for helping them to avoid a confrontation with Boeing, the nation's number one exporter and number two defense contractor.

Barnes has previous experience in helping the labor bureaucracy ward off an insurgent rank and file. He personally participated in the Teamsters sellout of the strike against United Parcel Service.

Despite the union's characterization of its calling off the strike as a way of “giving the company more time to think,” Boeing has made clear that while accepting the mediated talks, it is not going to budge. Jim Dagnon, a Boeing vice president, declared, “We've said pretty much that all the money we have is on the table. We made the best offer that we can. Now they're going to have to decide whether they can live with it.”

Dagnon admitted that the company's reorganization, whose main focus is to reduce workers' living standards to remain globally competitive, was the source of

friction in the negotiations. “I think the negotiations have become a symbol of all the frustrations they feel about the changes. Expectations got out of line with reality.”



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