

Boeing technical workers strike US aerospace giant

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Thousands of engineers and other white collar workers, members of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), struck the Boeing corporation Wednesday morning after the union broke off talks being held under the auspices of a federal mediator. The strike affected the aerospace giant's plants in Washington, Kansas, Florida, California, Oregon, Texas and Utah.

The SPEEA, Boeing's second largest union, represents about 22,000 engineers, scientists, manual writers, software designers and technicians. These workers design and modify airplanes, sign off on work before production can continue, handle problems called in by airlines and inspect parts. Of those represented by SPEEA, 13,780 are dues-paying members.

The walkout is the first full-scale strike by the union. In 1992 SPEEA called a largely symbolic 24-hour strike during contract negotiations; even then many crossed picket lines. On Wednesday hundreds of workers began picketing around Boeing's plants and an estimated 9,000 attended a morning rally at Renton stadium near Seattle, Washington. Union officials described the participation in the strike as "massive" and noted that many non-members were on the picket lines.

The impact of the walkout, however, is being undermined by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the largest union at Boeing, which is instructing its members to continue to work. The IAM has a clause in its contract which bars its members from honoring the picket lines of other unions, including other AFL-CIO unions.

SPEEA, which had been outside of the AFL-CIO for 50 years, voted last October to affiliate with the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) of the AFL-CIO. At the time AFL-

CIO President John Sweeney pledged to provide the labor federation's full backing to the Boeing professional workers.

Since the bitter 69-day strike by machinists in 1995, the IAM leadership has boasted that it has strengthened its "partnership" with Boeing. Last fall, under pressure from rank-and-file workers, Boeing agreed to higher than average pay increases for IAM workers. In exchange the IAM leadership gave the company a green light to further downsize its operations and increase productivity.

The striking professional workers are particularly angered over the company's refusal to grant similar pay increases to SPEEA members. At the same time, the white collar workers realize that the company wants to impose concessions on them as a precedent for future demands for give-backs from the machinists.

SPEEA members rejected two contract proposals agreed to by the union leadership. Rick Smolen, a design technician and 10-year SPEEA member in Everett, Washington, said, "I voted no for the contract. When it came down to it, Boeing wanted to take as much from us as it could. Because it knew the only way it could get IAM to pay medical on their next contract was to get SPEEA to pay medical first."

Chris Lomax, an engineer with SPEEA for 31 years, said, "We've had bad contracts from the company before—bad for us and the other unions. This time it seems they're trying to make up for the generosity to the IAM by sticking it to us."

SPEEA officials, who had been working closely with the AFL-CIO and the Clinton administration to avert a walkout, canceled an earlier strike deadline after two days of negotiations with Boeing failed to produce any movement. This provoked an explosion of anger by rank-and-file workers.

The main outstanding issues include guaranteed annual pay increases, job security and benefits. SPEEA officials broke off talks after Boeing refused to cede any ground on union demands, including the restoration of life insurance benefits, guaranteed raises and a lump sum bonus similar to that provided by the company to production workers.



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