

French Airbus worker: “Boeing and Airbus workers have the same enemy—we should fight them together”

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Over 27,000 employees of US aircraft manufacturer Boeing in Washington, Oregon and Kansas have been on strike since September 6, seeking to halt the outsourcing of their jobs, prevent the imposition of higher costs for healthcare and improve their pension fund and wages. The company's main rival in the world market for large airplanes is the European company Airbus, based largely in France and Germany.

The Boeing workers' union, the International Association of Machinists (IAM), is pressuring the company to give up concessions the union accepted in the 2002 contract allowing Boeing to use outside vendors—in place of unionised machinists—to deliver parts directly to the assembly line.

However, the IAM is not seeking to eliminate Boeing's ability to use vendors, but only to expand the union's right to compete for these jobs. The union bureaucracy is seeking to preserve its privileges by working with company executives to drive down wages and undermine conditions, thereby allowing dues-paying IAM members to be "competitive" with contract labour.

The WSWs interviewed Claude Néau, 52, who has been working at the Nantes Airbus plant in western France for 9 years. A member of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party, which represents production workers at the site), he is a metal worker and fitter:

Claude Néau: I participated in the two-week strike in the spring of 2007 at Airbus Nantes. When the president resigned for incompetence, because of the delays with the A380 and the A350, with a golden handshake worth €8.4 million in stock options, at the same time management told us that we would receive a profit-sharing bonus of less than €3, whereas it had been €3,000 the previous year.

People retiring are no longer replaced. They sack people on the slightest pretext, for the slightest little mistake. The production speeds are being increased without hiring new

workers. More and more work is being subcontracted out. It's a very tense situation in the workshops because of the Power8 restructuring plan. But the trade unions manage to contain the anger of the workers using the bosses' lies and appeals for calm.

WSWS: What do you know about the rivalry between Airbus and Boeing?

CN: They're vying for who's number one in the world. Boeing has sent its manufacturing to low-cost countries. Airbus is following suit and going further, it's setting up an FAL [Final Assembly Line] in China, which Boeing hasn't yet done. And it's making its subcontractors do the same thing, the same restructuring plan.

WSWS: Boeing workers are on strike because the company wants to improve its competitiveness by reducing benefits and outsourcing jobs. The workers want to win back concessions that the union has given away to Boeing, which made \$1.4 billion last year. New hires earn as little as \$12.37 per hour.

CN: It's the same thing at Airbus, with the complicity of the unions. Airbus is reducing our wages, and our working conditions are getting worse. Trade union leaders who have key jobs (foremen, workshop managers) are there to harass, punish, blackmail, discriminate against workers who do not follow the main trade union [Force Ouvrière (FO)—Workers Power], which is in the Airbus bosses' pocket. General wage rises are below the rise in the cost of living. FO and two smaller unions (we call them the *Ententes*), all of which are Airbus's servants, sign all the salary negotiations below the cost of living. They only defend individual wage rises.

WSWS: CEO Jim McNerney sent a message to Boeing workers in early October [<http://wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/boei-o10.shtml>] that ended with this: "our company is strongest when *all* of us—union and non union alike—are lined up together, working *for* our customers and *against* our competitors. I am hopeful those days will return again." He insists that "the issue of

competitiveness as it relates to this strike is a *big deal*."

CN: It's also the principal argument of the Airbus bosses to say that the enemy is Boeing. They're for division between the workers of each country. The trade unions go even further. They encourage division within Airbus between the French sites and those in other countries in Europe. The CGT boasts of not being nationalist when it comes to divisions with the Germans, who were denounced as responsible for the delay in the A380. But as soon as the issue was sending production of the A380 to Germany, they claimed that the Germans had the advantage.

WSWS: McNerney stresses that "labour disputes are affecting our customer relationship. Preserving our competitiveness has never been so important."

He makes a detailed analysis of the competition between Eads [European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company]/Airbus and Boeing, noting that "Eads/Airbus is growing stronger, too. It is dramatically restructuring and cutting costs in response to the weak dollar, and it is quickly moving toward a lower-cost global production model that also reaches into key customer markets—including the United States." McNerney points out that Eads/Airbus has just opened a final assembly line in China and that it's "expanding its presence in northern Africa, Mexico, India, and Russia." He concludes, "Airbus will gain a big cost advantage if we are unable to match them through our own productivity gains."

CN: Competitiveness, that's an argument put forward by Airbus too, as well as the trade unions of the *Ententes* during our two-week strike in the spring of 2007. It shows that the capitalist system is nothing but competition, an endless battle of one factory against another, one country against another. "Your strike is losing us clients that are going to Boeing," say the Airbus management as well as the unions.

WSWS: In his message, McNerney says that the American auto companies "all but fatally wounded themselves years ago by promising unsustainable benefit levels and by agreeing to contract conditions (including job guarantees) that limited their flexibility to run their businesses in the face of intense global competition. Today, their market shares continue to fall and their layoff has grown by thousands." What do you think of these arguments?

CN: It's what the Airbus bosses say to the French workers. The French and European labour force are too expensive and diminish our competitiveness with Boeing. I think that if they use the same weapons on both sides, the same arguments, the "descent into hell" may last endlessly for Boeing and Airbus workers. Meantime, Boeing and Airbus profits grow ever faster.

WSWS: A Boeing worker interviewed by the WSWS said "people criticise Airbus workers, why? They're like us. They

want to feed their families—earn a decent living, the Airbus workers and us." What message do you have for the striking Boeing workers? What perspective for the Boeing and Airbus workers?

CN: That was a fine thing to say! If the Airbus and Boeing workers fought together, we would be more effective against the capitalists who are exploiting us wherever we may be on the planet. Boeing and Airbus workers have the same common enemy, the bosses and capitalists who dominate us. We should fight them together.

We should struggle for the aircraft and other industries, banks, food not to belong to a handful of capitalists but that they should serve the needs of the planet. That there shouldn't be any owners. Workers should be responsible for the running and production and research, etc. No competition. It's possible to meet the needs of the planet by working just 25 hours a week, or less. There must be full transparency in the accounts and management. Today, with the present system, the trade unions are bought off and run by the bosses.

WSWS: Are there political parties in France that propose a struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society? What about the LCR/NPA [Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League, which is about to launch the New Anti-capitalist Party] and LO [Lutte Ouvrière—Workers Struggle]?

CN: To my knowledge, the left parties only propose to fight injustice *within* this system and at a national level. But in reality, they do nothing and are complicit in the capitalist and nationalist system.

WSWS: What future do you see for the international working class?

CN: That'll be after capitalism. We are obliged to come to that, there's no alternative! You have to begin by changing people's consciousness, which has been formatted into capitalism and nationalism for hundreds of years. We must destroy this system by a world revolution.



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