Boeing: engineers’ union sellout follows betrayal of machinists’ strike

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Negotiators for the union representing engineers and technicians at aerospace manufacturing giant Boeing reached a tentative agreement last Friday that betrays the interests of its membership. The deal comes only two weeks after Boeing machinists ended their strike with a similarly rotten contract imposed on them by the International Association of Machinists.

The new four-year proposal came a day after the Society for Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) approved a ballot of its membership for strike authorization. Friday evening, after reviewing the proposed contract, the two units representing the engineers and technicians recommended the tentative deal.

Discussions involved two contracts covering nearly 21,000 employees. Most workers are concentrated in the Puget Sound area of Washington State while several hundred are in Utah, California and Oregon. About 14,200 scientists, engineers, and other professionals are covered by one contract, while the other covers 6,700 manual writers, technicians, and other hourly workers.

Members will simultaneously vote on both the new contract and the strike authorization by December 1, the expiration date of their old contract, with a majority required for acceptance or rejection of each.

The main concerns of engineers and technicians are the need to improve wages, pensions and health care costs, the same issues dominating the machinists' recent contract struggle and 57-day strike—the third longest in Boeing history. As with the machinists, the key concern was the outsourcing of jobs to contractors.

Despite the massive profits reaped by Boeing from the labor of its workers—$13 billion in the last five years—SPEEA is recommending a contract that increases wages by only 2 percent yearly for engineers and 2.5 percent for technical workers. This is far below the rate of inflation and less than what the machinists received. An increase of up to 5 percent will be possible with an "incentive plan," code words for increased productivity.

A fourth year will be added to the contract, in line with the machinists' union contract—a move by Boeing to forestall labor conflict and keep wages low for an additional year.

Medical benefit deductibles paid by workers will increase by nearly 7 percent. The proposed contract fails to obtain any improvement in vacation days or a day off for Martin Luther King's birthday, a holiday for North American Airbus workers. The new contract contains no cost-of-living allowances and no ratification bonus.

The proposed contract does increase the amount to fund a SPEEA-controlled training program, to $24.8 million.

Most importantly, any hope that jobs will be protected from outsourcing by the contract are illusory. The agreement pushed through by SPEEA states that affected employees are allowed their "input of concerns and recommendations when considering decisions to outsource bargaining unit work." In other words, Boeing is granted carte blanche to destroy jobs. Additionally, this language places the burden on the individual worker to voice any opposition to outsourcing.

In a statement, SPEEA Executive Director Ray Goforth declined to directly endorse the contract, saying, "These agreements are the result of lots of hard work by all parties." He added, "It is gratifying that we could reach an agreement and put the decision in members' hands."

SPEEA states on its web site, however, "it is in the best interest of the company, the union and employees to understand the nature of Boeing's business strategies and plans regarding the use of non-Boeing labor." Furthermore, it characterizes the proposed contract as allowing "Boeing to remain competitive during unprecedented economic times."

In the lead-up to its 40-day strike in 2000, SPEEA sought to avoid a walkout of its members by obtaining the intervention of the federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The union then proceeded to cancel a February 3 strike deadline. Ultimately the engineers and technicians returned to work with a contract that accepted lower wage increases.

This time around, the struggle of Boeing engineers and technicians to defend their jobs, benefits and working conditions was further undermined by the contract agreed to November 1 by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM).

Notwithstanding the IAM's claim that their contract provides "job security," the machinists' agreement allows Boeing the "flexibility" it has demanded to continue outsourcing jobs to low-wage vendors.

The machinists' eight-week strike won the IAM the "right" to bid against nonunion vendors by demonstrating that it could be more productive at a lower cost. Inevitably, the IAM will wind up cooperating with Boeing in the destruction of the jobs and wages of its members.

Hiding behind the current financial crisis—and adopting an even more brazen attitude than that of the IAM bureaucracy—SPEEA leaders have not even attempted to disguise the fact that their proposed contract for engineers and technicians will do nothing to stop the aerospace company's outsourcing or attacks on working conditions.