

Negotiations planned in nine-week Lockheed Martin strike

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In the ninth week of strike, the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers (IAM), representing 3,600 workers, and the Lockheed Martin management have agreed to meet with federal mediators on Wednesday. The dispute involves 3,600 workers at the Fort Worth plant and two military bases in California and Maryland.

On April 23, the workers walked out after rejecting Lockheed's demand to replace the pensions for new-hires with a 401(k) program and make cuts in health care benefits of all hourly employees.

Replacement workers were first introduced May 24, when the company brought in 10 so-called "temporary workers" to assist management in getting production moving. Management has to date brought in 300 strikebreakers and threatens to increase that number to 2,000 if necessary to meet production schedules.

The plant produces the new F-35 joint strike fighter aircraft, the Pentagon's costliest weapons project. The US military and Lockheed Martin have been in discussions on finalizing a new contract. Referring to the effect of the strike on the procurement of F-35s, Defense Department spokesperson, Cheryl Irwin, said, "Our testing continues. But our main focus remains on moving the program forward and remaining neutral as the parties resolve their contract issues in a mutually beneficial manner."

Pressure from the federal government is being brought to bear on the aircraft company to both cut its costs and push production schedules. The F-35 project has been the subject of scrutiny and debate in Washington on the question of cost overruns and production delays. US Senator Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in an interview, "We have to keep the pressure on. We've got to have contracts which are

fixed-priced. We have to make reductions."

The strategy of the IAM has been to conduct a public relations campaign. Since the first day of the strike, the union has filed three unfair labor practice claims with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) which have all been dismissed.

The company's position is intransigent. As it has been ramping up its use of scabs, Executive Vice President and head of Lockheed's Aeronautics Division, Larry Lawson sent a memorandum to employees stating, "While we respect the union's right to reject our proposal, we must maintain our posture on this issue because of economic and national security realities. We regret that together we have not yet found common ground and that—until an agreement is reached—we are compelled to pursue alternative measures to ensure we meet our commitments."

He added, "we're accelerating the hiring of additional temporary workers to keep the business moving forward." He also reported that 500 strikers "across the three affected locations" have returned to work.

Despite the pressure from the company and the government, striking workers remain defiant. Danny Cook, a worker with 34 years at Lockheed, told WFAA TV, "This is the biggest fight most of us will ever have and we have to prevail."

The IAM issued a press release in Washington, DC on June 18 indicating that the union accepted the invitation from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service to sit at the bargaining table with Lockheed and federal mediators. This will be the first negotiations since the strike began.



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