

The International Socialist Organization and the betrayal of the Boeing workers

Jerry White
10 January 2014

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Boeing workers at the hands of the International Association of Machinists, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) has published a commentary that whitewashes the role of the IAM and seeks to prevent workers from drawing any political lessons from this latest betrayal by the unions.

Last November, in the latest expression of mounting opposition among rank-and-file workers to the right-wing union apparatuses, thousands of Boeing workers in Washington, Oregon and Kansas overwhelmingly voted down a concessions-laden eight-year contract extension pushed by IAM International and District 751 leaders. In doing so, they courageously defied the airplane manufacturing giant's threats to move production and destroy their jobs.

The IAM International held a revote on January 3 and claimed the deal passed by 51 percent to 49 percent, a margin of just 600 votes out of the nearly 24,000 ballots cast. Ignoring charges of vote-rigging and demands for a recount, the IAM imposed the deal. The reactionary agreement ends company-paid pensions won by Boeing workers in 1947, bans strikes until 2024, and leaves the door open for outsourcing.

The ISO ignored the struggle for weeks and then published a November 27 article, "Why the IAM said no to Boeing's blackmail," which identified the workers with the very organization against which they were rebelling. Following the second contract vote, in a January 6 article entitled "Beaten by Blackmail and Betrayal at Boeing," the ISO felt obliged to make some criticisms of the IAM.

Joining Boeing's "extortion campaign," author Darrin Hoop wrote, were the "political elite of Washington state, dominated by the Democratic Party," and "top leaders of the IAM, who were determined to shove the concessions contract down the machinists' throats."

The article continued, "Boeing machinists have a right to be bitter and angry after they were dumped on by the company, local politicians and their own union." What was needed, it continued, was a "new rank-and-file network of

activists at Boeing—one that can stand up to management, and can provide a lead independent of the union when its leaders refuse to fight."

That the ISO was not speaking of a break with the IAM was made clear by its support for a dissident faction of the same corrupt, pro-company apparatus. Hoop went on to quote a "union activist" calling for support for the campaign of a long-time executive of the IAM International, Jay Cronk, who is seeking to replace IAM President Tom Buffenbarger in an upcoming Labor Department-supervised election.

"Brother Cronk knows the inner workings of the IAM," former IAM official David Clay was quoted saying. "He seems open to listening to the rank and file, and the rank and file will be who elects him."

Cronk does indeed know the "inner workings" of the IAM, having headed the International's transportation department for 14 years, where he imposed scores of concessionary contracts on airline and commuter rail workers. He also has a long history of collaborating with the same "political elite" that the ISO hypocritically denounces, serving as one of the top legislative lobbyists and sitting on several Presidential Emergency Boards that suppressed strikes by transportation workers.

The promotion of Cronk made clear the ISO's real agenda: not the development of an independent movement of the working class against the corporations and the government, which requires throwing off the dead weight of the unions and building new, democratic organizations of struggle, but the further integration of the ISO into the trade union bureaucracy and a strengthening of its ties to the Democratic Party.

The ISO chiefly concerns itself with helping sections of the trade union apparatus rebrand itself with some "left" phrases in order to head off a rebellion by the workers. In his article, Hoop wrote: "The IAM would do well in the future to follow the lead of the brave local unions that backed the Seattle City Council campaign of Socialist Alternative candidate Kshama Sawant."

Whatever her nominal criticisms of the two-party system, Sawant, like the ISO, is a defender of the trade union bureaucracy. Her politics fall entirely within the orbit of the Democratic Party and the profit system.

In the aftermath of the first vote by the Boeing workers, she rushed to prop up the IAM, standing side-by-side with union bureaucrats and Democratic Party politicians at a November 18 “Build it Here” rally in Seattle. Since then, she has hailed the city’s new Democratic mayor, Ed Murray, for supporting a rise in the minimum wage—a campaign that the unions and their pseudo-left supporters are promoting to provide the Democrats with a phony populist cover for the 2014 midterm elections.

This support for the union bureaucracy goes hand in hand with a conscious effort to block the development of socialist consciousness and the emergence of the working class as an independent political force.

In Hoop’s article, this takes the form of denying that Boeing’s threat to move production of the 777X jet out of the Seattle area to a low-wage state if the contract extension was rejected was real. This enables the ISO to boost the local leadership, which reversed its initial support for the contract extension and called for rejection in the second vote, while advancing no strategy for opposing a decision by the company to move production and eliminate jobs.

The threat to the workers’ jobs was very real, and it posed the need to develop a strategy for opposing concessions *and* defending jobs. Such a strategy could only be one that combined industrial action with a *political* struggle against the existing political and economic—capitalist—system; a strategy that rejected the pro-capitalist politics of the IAM and the unions in general, and based itself on a recognition of the need to end the private ownership and control of industry and place it under public ownership and democratic control.

The Boeing workers, in common with workers in every part of the economy and in every country, came face to face with this political necessity once they decided to fight the destruction of their conditions and basic rights. The ISO, however, does not want workers to draw this essential lesson because, despite the organization’s name and occasional socialist rhetoric, it speaks for privileged, right-wing social layers that are hostile to socialist revolution and the emergence of an independent movement of the working class.

“The sad reality,” Hoop wrote, “is the union didn’t need to fall for Boeing’s blackmail demand of jobs for concessions.” He then proceeded to quote as supposed proof one industry analyst who advised the company not to move production.

But the workers were all too aware of the outsourcing of

thousands of Boeing jobs and the experience of tens of millions of steel, auto and other industrial workers who have seen their factories closed down and their jobs shipped to lower cost regions. The absence of a leadership among the workers capable of providing a perspective for mobilizing broader working class support and imbuing the struggle with a socialist standpoint—very possibly combined with ballot-stuffing by the union leadership—enabled the IAM, the Democratic politicians and Boeing to wear down and overcome the opposition of the workers.

The Socialist Equality Party, in its statement urging workers to reject the contract on January 3, wrote:

“Rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the Boeing struggle out of the hands of all sections of the IAM. Workers should elect rank-and-file factory committees, consisting of the most militant and trusted workers, to broaden the struggle to mobilize the whole working population in the Puget Sound area against the blackmail threats of Boeing and to defend the jobs and living standards of all workers. Appeals for support should be issued to workers throughout the United States facing similar attacks and to other workers internationally.

“This must become the beginning of an industrial and political counter-offensive by the whole working class. If secure and good-paying jobs, health care, pensions and other basic necessities are to be defended, then the social rights of the working class must take precedence over the supposed right of the corporate and financial elite to plunder society.”

The bitter experience of the Boeing workers underscores the necessity of building the SEP as the new, revolutionary and socialist leadership of the working class. We urge Boeing workers to contact the SEP, study our history and program and make the decision to join and build our party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact