

Stunning rebuke to machinists' union at South Carolina Boeing plant

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In a major blow to the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), employees at Boeing's Commercial Airplanes plant in South Carolina overwhelmingly rejected the IAM in a union recognition vote Tuesday. The National Labor Relations Board reported that 74 percent, or 2,097 of the 2,828 workers who cast ballots at the North Charleston plant, voted against joining the IAM.

Despite threats of layoffs and cost-cutting by Boeing and a years-long campaign by the IAM, the union was incapable of generating support from the workers who build Boeing's new 787 Dreamliner jet. The IAM's treacherous record of collaborating with Boeing's attack on jobs and living standards did far more to repel workers than the well-funded campaign against the IAM by Boeing and South Carolina's right-wing politicians.

President Donald Trump is expected to appear at the South Carolina facility on Friday to celebrate the rollout of its first 787-10 jet liner, the largest version of its Dreamliner.

The North Charleston site has grown rapidly since the bitter 58-day machinists' strike in 2008, which shut down Boeing's plants in Washington State, Oregon and Kansas, and delayed production of the company's 787 jet liner, which was deemed critical to compete with Airbus. In 2008 and 2009, Boeing bought fuselage subassembly facilities from former suppliers Vought and Italian-based Global Aeronautica, investing \$750 million to expand the facility as insurance against future strikes.

Boeing spent \$1 billion more to expand aircraft engine casing and interiors production, increasing its employment in South Carolina to 8,400 in 2014. According to the local *Post and Courier*, Boeing is one of the Charleston region's largest employers, with an overall workforce of 7,565 people. "Its local payroll has declined by 700 jobs since last year, and the company in January offered voluntary layoffs to hundreds of engineers company-wide, including in North Charleston," the Charleston newspaper reported. "Boeing has said involuntary layoffs could be announced if financial goals are not met."

The key issue in the 2008 strike was the company's outsourcing to nonunion suppliers in the Carolinas and elsewhere and the ongoing reduction of the 30,000-strong workforce at Boeing's Puget Sound locations, near Seattle, and in Renton, Washington. The deal reached by the IAM did nothing to stop outsourcing and accepted wage and other concessions.

In 2007, several hundred Vought workers voted to bring in the IAM at the North Charleston plant. The IAM then reportedly signed a sweetheart contract with Boeing that contained sweeping concessions, so that the union would be retained as the bargaining agent under the new owner. Disgusted with the loss of benefits and the job cuts, the Vought workers voted to decertify the IAM in September 2009. A month later, Boeing announced that line 2 of its 787 production would be transferred to Charleston. The company also received \$1 billion in state and local incentives.

In 2010, the IAM filed a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) complaint charging that the company's decision to move production to the nonunion plant was in retaliation for the 2008 strike. Obama's labor board, in April 2011, moved to prevent Boeing from utilizing the 787 Dreamliner production line in South Carolina.

By this time, responding to pressure from Airbus, Boeing launched a new large-size 737 MAX jet liner. After executives announced that no decision had been made on where to assemble it, the IAM agreed again to accept deep concessions, including the extension of the contract expiration date to 2016, and then proceeded to drop the NLRB complaint.

In 2013, the company threatened to move production of its new 777X airliner from its Everett factory, north of Seattle, to South Carolina, and eliminate 10,000 to 20,000 jobs in Washington and Oregon. Working behind the backs of the rank and file, IAM Local 751 and IAM International officials concocted a deal with Boeing that stripped workers of the right to strike, ended company-paid pensions and imposed higher health costs and inferior medical plans in line with Obama's "Cadillac Tax" on supposedly

overgenerous health plans. The contract, which would be extended to 2024, also imposed poverty-level wages on new workers and a de facto 10 percent wage cut on current workers.

Rank-and-file workers rebelled against this blackmail by Boeing, the IAM and the state's Democratic governor, Jay Inslee. They voted down the deal by a two-to-one margin in November 2013. Before the vote, hundreds of machinists marched inside the plant, some carrying signs, some blowing whistles and chanting "Vote 'no.'" Workers denounced the union for selling them out.

All the forces arrayed against the workers—the company, the union, the media, the politicians—then ratcheted up their threats. At the same time, the local union officials repackaged basically the same deal—adding \$5,000 to the signing bonus and retaining six years for new hires to reach top pay scale, instead of 22 years. The IAM International essentially took over and ordered a new vote during the holidays, when fewer workers would be around. With minor protestations, Local 751 officials went right along. Amid denunciations of vote fraud and demands for a recount, the IAM claimed the deal was approved by 51 to 49 percent, or only 600 votes.

The IAM cancelled an earlier organizing drive at the South Carolina plant in 2015, complaining of interference by South Carolina's Republican governor, Nikki Haley, now Trump's ambassador to the United Nations. It was clear then that they did not have the required votes. The latest result—only 26 percent—was a decline from the 30 percent of workers who signed cards expressing interest in the union, which triggered the vote.

Following its defeat at the South Carolina plant Wednesday, IAM lead organizer Mike Evans said: "We're disappointed the workers at Boeing South Carolina will not yet have the opportunity to see all the benefits that come with union representation."

In fact, the vote was a verdict by workers on the "benefits of union representation," i.e., the record of miserable betrayals that have cost workers their jobs and livelihoods. Why should any worker pay \$78 a month in union dues to an organization that does the bidding of corporate management?

The International Socialist Organization, Solidarity, Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left groups—whose members hold leading positions in the union apparatus—insist that the unions are the only "genuine working class organizations." But workers are increasingly rebelling against these right-wing, pro-capitalist outfits that are allied with the corporations and increasingly with the Trump administration.

The unions chiefly still exist only where they have the

support of the corporations and the state, which see their utility in crushing worker resistance and imposing management's dictates. Even with the backing of Volkswagen—which signed a secret deal with the United Auto Workers to gain recognition in the plant—workers at VW's Chattanooga, Tennessee plant defeated the UAW in a 2014 vote. Like the South Carolina workers, many VW workers were well aware of the string of betrayals by the UAW.

Workers need to be organized to fight, but not through the IAM or any of the other anti-working class organizations in the AFL-CIO and Change to Win federations. New rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and committed to the methods of the class struggle, must be built.

A call to the IAM organizing headquarters from the *World Socialist Web Site* asking for their explanation for the defeat was not returned. A clear explanation, however, was given by a veteran Boeing worker from Everett, Washington, who spoke to the WSWs.

"The IAM is the best union that Boeing could buy," Frank said. "It's worthless. The outcome of the vote in South Carolina was not a surprise. Boeing and the state officials worked in concert to keep it a nonunion state. But the unions are nothing more than corporations upon themselves—they are not for the workers.

"What did they have to offer the South Carolina workers? The IAM was only looking to fill its bank accounts with dues money. They make you pay a flat rate of \$78 a month even if you are a 'Pay Grade 1' worker making \$15 an hour. Here in Seattle, the union has allowed the consolidation and elimination of so many classifications. The higher pay grades are displaced with lower pay grades. The younger generation is getting screwed, and the company is cleaning house and getting rid of the higher-paid workers with early retirements.

"Workers have no rights on the shop floor. The IAM business reps don't want grievances, and if you stand up for what's in the contract, they treat you like a pariah. They got rid of the pensions, and you pay progressively more out-of-pocket for health care.

"The United States is a class system. Whether it's Democrats or Republicans up there, they're telling us poor workers, 'this is your lot in life, you're not a member of our club.'"



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