

US aerospace workers strike at United Launch Alliance

Our reporter
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After 21 days of negotiations, nearly 600 aerospace workers organized in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) have struck United Launch Alliance (ULA) worksites in Decatur, Alabama, in Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, and at Cape Canaveral in Florida on Monday, May 7. The walkout occurred immediately after workers voted down what ULA called its “last and final offer” the day before.

ULA, a joint operation created by aerospace giants Lockheed and Boeing, launches Delta and Atlas rockets into space for NASA, the military, and private enterprises. The launch operator, headquartered in Centennial, Colorado, employs 300 workers at the Decatur site where the rockets are assembled, 225 at the Cape Canaveral facility, and 75 at Vandenberg. The company is demanding that its hourly employees make increased contributions to their health care benefits and pensions. ULA is offering insulting wage increases of 1.5 percent for the first year of the contract, 1.75 percent for the second year, and only 2 percent for the third year. Management offered a \$6,000 bonus as a bribe if the contract was approved before May 7.

Under the old contract, when rockets were launched from Vandenberg, ULA would ask for volunteers from the Florida work force to travel to California to assist in launches. The previous contract stipulated that employees could not be required to stay there for more than 30 days. ULA is now stating that Florida-based workers can be forced to travel to Vandenberg, remain there for 30 days, travel back to Florida for two days, and then be required to travel back to the California launch site for another 30-day stint. ULA now wants to use Decatur workers at Vandenberg at Decatur wage-levels, which are lower than those employed at the Cape Canaveral and Vandenberg locations. The

proposed travel conditions will severely impact the quality of life for workers with children or who care for elderly parents.

ULA is also demanding the right to allow management to step in and perform work at any time and to impose mandatory overtime without notice. The company wants to allow a third party to manage the workers’ pensions. ULA has language in its contract offer that management will “guarantee that no employees will be displaced due to subcontracting and that Company will only subcontract work that has been subcontracted in the past.” However, the company is now insisting on the creation of a new job classification of “Warehouse Worker.”

Workers will be given three choices:

- Transition to another job at their current pay rate.
- Move to the new classification of “Warehouse Worker” at the rate of \$22.21 per hour.
- Accept a “voluntary layoff” with a severance payout of one week’s pay for every year of service not to exceed 20 weeks.

ULA workers fear, and rightfully so, that ULA is attempting to set the framework to further cut everyone’s pay and benefits and/or bring in similarly skilled workers needing employment in that industry. Three years ago, at the time of the latest contract negotiations, the ULA hourly workforce stood at 840. The contract agreed to in 2015 (a travesty in itself) was narrowly approved by a margin of only 53 percent in favor.

Management has offered to increase the annual cost of living increment from \$850 to \$1,200 per year but is now demanding discontinuation of the adjustments on a quarterly basis. It is offering an increase in the shift differential from 14 cents to \$1.50 per hour, but at the expense of increasing the length of the graveyard shift

from 6.5 to 8 hours.

This is not the first time that workers employed in the launch industry have struck. In 2005, prior to the formation of ULA, 1,500 machinists struck Boeing for three months in a struggle for decent health care benefits. The strike ended with little improvement for the workers. Since 2016, ULA has laid off workers at its sites in Colorado, California, Alabama, and Florida in its attempts to match the competition offered by the cut-rate, virtual slave labor operation of Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Initial statements issuing from the mouths of IAM officials have been full of typical false bravado as they lead their members out on strike only to wear them down and eventually force them to accede to company demands. Statements made by Kevin Dimeco, an IAM organizer at Cape Canaveral, to the press that the dispute with ULA was not about economic issues is an indication that the IAM has no intention of waging a serious struggle in defense of its members. Furthermore, in a deliberate move to isolate strikers, other ULA sites, in the Denver area, San Diego, and Harlingen, Texas, are not being shut down at this point.

As for the IAM, it is insisting that it will take no actions that seriously affect management. Said Dimeco, "The last thing we want to see is anything getting delayed. Hopefully ULA comes back to the table quickly, so we can resolve this and get on down the road like we have been for years. The last thing we want to do is put a black mark on the space industry."

ULA has scheduled the launch of the Parker Solar Probe for NASA on July 31. An ominous warning has been sent to the strikers with a statement by ULA spokesperson Jessica Rye that the company had engaged its "strike contingency plan" and that it was on schedule to support the next launch. Said Rye, "Per our plan, we will complete final processing of that vehicle with trained and experienced employees following established procedures and quality standards."



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