

Tennessee workers at military research facility continue strike for health and safety

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Approximately 670 skilled workers at the Arnold Engineering and Development Complex (AEDC) in Tullahoma, Tennessee, voted overwhelmingly on Friday to reject a new contract proposal, choosing instead to continue a strike that began on July 2. The deal had been reached between the Air Engineering Metal Trades Council (AEMTC) union and the workers' employers, National Aerospace Solutions, LLC (NAS) and Chugach Federal Solutions Inc., which are contractors for the AEDC.

The AEDC is a research facility operated by the US Air Force's Materiel Command, which is headquartered at Arnold Air Force Base in Tullahoma, but composed of 10 facilities spread across the country. The AEDC "operates more than 68 test facilities, including, but not limited to, aerodynamic and propulsion wind tunnels, rocket and turbine engine test cells, environmental chambers, arc heaters, ballistic ranges, sled tracks, centrifuges, and other specialized test units," according to the Air Force.

The "no" vote was motivated in particular by opposition to health care cost increases and disability benefit cuts. The workers in the union often are required to perform dangerous jobs in the facility. The workers had also voted to reject a contract in April.

The last contract for the skilled trades workers expired in 2020, and their last strike was in 1990, according to the union.

The Environmental Protection Agency has previously reported that "several areas of the facility are contaminated by substances, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and volatile organic compounds and spills of jet and rocket fuel, chlorofluorocarbon solvents, nitric acid and other materials (and) PCBs from the site have been detected in local creeks, in the water, sediment and in fish."

The site was proposed for addition to the Superfund National Priorities List (NPL) in August 1994. But as of May 2010 the site had not been added to the NPL, the EPA concluding that human exposure and groundwater contamination are "under control."

Except for the Tullahoma newspaper, the strike and the Friday vote rejecting the company offer again have been ignored. An internet search revealed virtually no reporting and no interviews with rank-and-file workers by newspapers in Nashville, the state capital and largest city.

The strike is being isolated by the trade unions throughout the state and nationwide. In a statement from the Tennessee AFL-CIO, the union bureaucracy claimed "solidarity with our AEMTC brothers and sisters who are asking for dignity and respect on the job." Pledging to "call" on NAS to return to negotiations, the state AFL-CIO proposed no direct assistance, only that they were "ready to assist our labor family as needed."

The walkout, according to local reports, is officially an "unfair labor practice" strike, a category which under US labor law restricts the union from raising economic demands. However, workers are demanding better wages, health insurance coverage and disability insurance. The disability issue is a large component of the workers' dispute with NAS, according to the union's president.

"If you're familiar with Arnold Air Force Base and the job that gets done in there, it's a very, very dangerous job, and workers get hurt all the time," he said. "Sometimes they get severely hurt. We have a disability plan which, three years ago was cut from a 24-month plan to an 18-month plan, and the company is trying now to cut it further."

The union president told the newspaper there were

anywhere from 30 to 50 severely injured workers at Arnold, “making the cut to disability a non-negotiable item.”

A report given in 2011 by Dr. David Elrod, general manager of Aerospace Testing Alliance, said there were many potentially dangerous areas of the facility.

“There are still non-breathable gases used. People still have to work at great heights above ground. There are still high-pressure systems in operation. They are hazards that come with the nature of the work done at AEDC,” Dr. Elrod said. “It’s amazing, they have 4,000-psi air and combustible gases, extremely hot temperatures, extremely fast gas velocities as they test hypersonic propulsion systems—they have almost every danger you can imagine.”

Elrod’s report stated: “The last fatal incident on base was April 23, 2001, at the Propulsion Wind Tunnel Facility Model Installation building. Arcenio Avila was a Guatemalan native working for a subcontractor that was demolishing the roof. Someone had removed an exhaust fan during the night and the safety barrier was missing. As Avila backed up with a wheelbarrow, he tripped and fell through the hole where the fan had been. Avila had been in America three weeks.”



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