

St. Louis Boeing defense workers vote down contract, prepare to strike

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Are you a Boeing worker? The WSWS wants to hear from you. Fill out the form at the end of this article to let us know what you think about the contract, what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for in next week's strike. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Sunday 2,500 Boeing workers in the St. Louis, Missouri area overwhelmingly voted to reject a tentative agreement reached between the company and the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers District 837 (IAM 837). Having voted down the contract, workers are now set to go on strike starting August 1st. This would be the first strike by workers at these Boeing plants in over 20 years.

The Boeing workers are spread across three plants in St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri, and Mascoutah, Illinois. At these plants workers build the F-15 and F-18 military aircraft as well as drones, missiles and other aerospace weapons used by the US military.

A strike at the plants would therefore have a major impact not only on Boeing but on the American military-industrial complex as a whole. It comes as the United States floats the possibility of sending NATO-built warplanes to Ukraine, in a sharp escalation of Western involvement in the proxy war against Russia. It also comes in the leadup to a provocative trip by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to the island of Taiwan, which mainland China regards as a rebel province, threatening all-out war in the South China Sea.

As the United States deepens its military escalation around the world, the demands for war planes and weapons will only increase. By slashing workers' wages and benefits just before these deadly events transpire, Boeing is setting themselves up to reap billions in war profits.

The workers are demanding improvements to pay that

will keep up with inflation, the elimination of the two-tier system, and to keep the employer contributions to their 401K. The proposed contract offered a first year raise of just \$1.50 and \$2.00 per hour depending on where a worker already falls on the pay scale and only a 3 percent raise for the following two years. With inflation at over 9 percent these proposed "raises" are in reality a pay cut.

Workers at the top of the pay scale have not received any general wage increase in over seven years while those below it received only a 6 percent increase over that same period. Additionally, the proposed agreement would have massively slashed the company's contribution to worker's retirement plans.

"The contract they offered is complete garbage," one worker wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "they aren't wanting to pay us what we are worth for keeping them going. We had to work under hard times putting our families at risk for COVID and we didn't receive anything from it ... at the end of the day we are losing money."

A former worker told the WSWS, "Having gone through a few contracts, this offer seems far less than what I received. I remember MONTHLY increases plus a significant shift differential. I was THE very low man on the totem pole and started out at just over \$13 an hour and ended after being cut (due to a production slow-down) a few years later, at over \$20 an hour."

In response to the groundswell of opposition from workers, IAM local 837 was compelled to recommend to its members to reject their own tentative agreement. Knowing that the proposed contract would have sparked a rebellion among the rank-and-file workers if they openly backed it, the IAM is hoping to position itself as opponents of the contract.

In a statement after the workers rejected the contract,

IAM Local 837 officials said, “Our members have spoken loudly and with one voice. We reject Boeing’s current contract offer and will strike at all three St. Louis area locations, starting at 12:01 a.m. on Monday, Aug. 1, 2022.”

Boeing in a statement of their own declared its intention to use scab labor to keep production going: “Boeing is disappointed with Sunday’s vote to reject a strong, highly competitive offer. We are activating our contingency plan to support continuity of operations in the event of a strike.”

That workers rejected the deal and are now on course to go on strike is a powerful demonstration of their determination to fight for decent wages and living conditions. But the IAM apparatus is maneuvering and bidding for time. It is by no means excluded that the union will announce a deal at the last minute, calling off the planned strike action. Workers should be on guard against any attempt to call off the strike or end it prematurely, and organize themselves to ensure rank-and-file control over the strike and future bargaining sessions.

The IAM has a long record of enforcing, or attempting to enforce, sellout contracts. In 2013, the IAM provoked a rank-and-file rebellion when 31,000 workers at its massive airliner factory in Everett, Washington rejected an IAM-backed contract by a 2 to 1 margin. The following year, the IAM helped force through deep cuts in a seven-and-a-half year contract extension in St. Louis. The deal replaced defined-benefit pensions with the current 401(k) and cut wages between 8 and 49 percent, depending on classification.

The vote at St. Louis also follows the unanimous rejection by 1,000 IAM members at Harley-Davidson in Pennsylvania last month of an IAM-endorsed contract which maintained the hated two-tier wage system and kept wage increases well below inflation.

There is enormous potential for the St. Louis workers to link up with other defense contractors in a united struggle for wages and benefits. Their vote is only the latest in growing signs of unrest in the broader defense industry. Last November, workers at the critical Navy shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi and Newport News, Virginia rejected sellout contracts by wide margins. The United Steelworkers, however, was later able to force through similar contracts in a second vote.



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