

Machinists' union cancels strike of Boeing defense workers at last minute, rams through sellout deal

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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 which was ratified last week. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) canceled a strike at three Boeing plants in St. Louis at the 11th hour Sunday, July 31, shortly before it was due to begin the following Monday. On Wednesday, the IAM rammed through a sellout contract virtually identical to one which workers voted overwhelmingly to reject on July 24.

Workers were so furious at the terms of the first tentative agreement that, fearing a rebellion from below, the IAM itself called for a no vote against their own contract proposal. Workers' principal demand was to restore their pension plans, which had been almost entirely scrapped in the proposed contract. Workers also called for improvements to general wages that would keep up with soaring inflation.

"The contract they offered is complete garbage," one St. Louis Boeing worker told the WSWS. "They do not want 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." The worker concluded, "At the end of the day we are losing money."

After the contract proposal was overwhelmingly rejected by the workers, the IAM scheduled a strike for August 1, but returned to discussions with the company to work out how best to push through an agreement. On July 31st, the IAM announced a second tentative agreement and suspended the strike until Thursday, August 4 in the event the contract was voted down.

The new agreement is essentially the same as the original proposal. The only significant change was an increase in the one-time signing bonus to \$8,000 with an option to contribute the cash into workers' 401(k)s. The IAM has claimed that the agreement "won" a 14 percent wage increase over the life of the contract, but with the inflation rate at over 9 percent, by the end of the three-year agreement workers will be earning far less in real value compared to today.

The IAM did not announce a breakdown of the vote. In addition to raising serious questions about the integrity of the balloting, in which workers allegedly approved a contract almost identical to one they rejected by over 90 percent less than two weeks prior, this also suggests significant opposition to the agreement among the rank and file. If it had been passed by a wide margin, the IAM no doubt would have been crowing about it from the rooftops.

The three Boeing facilities employ 2,500 workers and are a critical component in the United States military-industrial complex. They build the F-15 Eagle and F-18 Hornet fighter jets as well as drones, missiles and other aerospace weapons used by the US military.

Both aircraft models are critical to the military even though they have been superseded by more technologically advanced replacements, the F-22 and F-35C, respectively. The F-15 remains the most numerous model of air superiority fighter deployed by the Air Force, due in large measure to the prohibitive costs of the F-22 which forced the early cancellation of the program. The F-18 remains for the time being the principal combat aircraft deployed on US aircraft carriers. Its replacement, the F-35C, is the most expensive fighter ever produced, and has been plagued

by delays and serious design flaws.

A strike at the facilities therefore could have had serious repercussions for Washington's war plans in Ukraine and Taiwan. In Ukraine, the White House has floated sending US-built fighter jets in recent weeks to supplement the country's aging fleet of Soviet-era fighters, in what would represent a major escalation of US involvement in its proxy war against Russia. The F-18 would also feature centrally in a US war against China over control of Taiwan, which the mainland considers a rebel province.

Given these circumstances, it is almost certain that the Biden administration intervened behind the scenes to prevent a strike. Indeed, Biden has relied heavily on the unions in other critical strategic industries such as shipping and the railroads to maintain production and prevent strikes. On the West Coast docks, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union is collaborating with Biden to keep workers on the job more than a month after the expiration of their current contract. Whatever the case may be, however, the IAM has engineered a sellout in the name of "national unity."

The ramming through of the contract at Boeing follows sellouts last year by the United Steelworkers union at shipyards in Newport News, Virginia, which builds aircraft carriers, and Pascagoula, Mississippi, which builds guided missile destroyers. Workers at both shipyards rejected deals that included wage increases far below the cost of inflation, only for the USW to keep them on the job and eventually ram through deals similar to the ones that workers rejected.

The experience at St. Louis is fresh confirmation that defense workers cannot allow themselves to be subordinated to the pro-corporate union bureaucracy. They must organize themselves independently in order to assert control over their own struggle and fight for a better standard of living.



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