

6,000 workers strike Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kansas

Chase Lawrence
25 June 2023

Six thousand workers struck Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kansas, after an overwhelming rejection of the sellout tentative contract, which was backed by the union, District 70, Local Lodge 839 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). According to the IAM, the contract was rejected by 79 percent of members, and 85 percent voted in favor of strike. Ahead of the walkout, the company paused production, effectively locking workers out.

The contract that the workers rejected contained a measly 16 percent raise over four years under conditions where Spirit already pays wages below industry standards. If inflation stays above 4 percent, the “raise” would constitute a wage cut in real terms.

Workers are calling for both higher raises as well as better healthcare coverage, with workers reporting that the tentative agreement calls for a doubling of healthcare co-pays. Some prescriptions are no longer covered either, including diabetes medications.

Spirit is an international parts manufacturer serving various lines of commercial aircraft, such as the popular Airbus A series of passenger jets, Boeing 700 series of passenger jets and Bombardier business jets.

The contract covers 55 percent of Spirit’s 12,000 US workers, the majority of whom are employed in Wichita. As Reuters noted, “Spirit is one of the most consequential suppliers for aerospace heavyweights Boeing and Airbus.”

It also produces parts for an extensive list of military aircraft, including the P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, KC-46A aerial refueling tanker aircraft, CH-53K King Stallion heavy lift helicopter used by the US Marine Corps and the B-21 Raider stealth strategic bomber.

Its website advertises, “Spirit AeroSystems is committed to delivering the next generation of military

aircraft — leading manufacturing for large, advanced composite aerostructures.”

Spirit workers are in a powerful position. Already the strike has caused Boeing shares to fall 2.4 percent and Spirit to drop 9.4 percent.

Reuters noted, “A prolonged work stoppage at Spirit could have ripple effects for the aircraft makers it supplies, eventually forcing them to slow or stop jetliner assembly at a time when both Airbus and Boeing are ramping up production.”

The strike also threatens Boeing’s plan to boost output of its 737 MAX jets. According to J.P. Morgan analyst Seth Seifman, Spirit has also already been “grappling with a recent quality issue on 737 fuselages and is experiencing cash flow pressures,” putting even more pressure on the company to find a quick resolution.

According to the *Wichita Eagle*, “If a resolution is reached within a week, it should take Spirit AeroSystems no more than a quarter to make up losses,” citing Jeremy Hill, director of the Center for Economic Development and Business Research at Wichita State University.

Hill further stated, “If it’s only one or two days, Spirit’s going to have them working overtime and nights and weekends, and they’re going to make up that lost time.” That is, a quick sellout contract would essentially not cost the company a penny.

He noted that the strikers are in a powerful position given the demand for highly skilled and specialized aerospace workers, saying, “Today, we’re in an environment where there’s less labor available generally—particularly the aerospace [workers] that are skilled, which changes the power dynamic.”

In contrast to other strikes where the union bureaucracy has been able to force workers to let

strikebreakers and materials flow in and out of factories as corporations pleased, the press reported, “Hundreds were at Spirit on Saturday morning, manning 28 gates along the massive industrial property.” A couple thousand showed up for the kickoff of the strike.

Meanwhile, the Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Office asked drivers to avoid the area impacted by the strikes.

Some veterans of the last strike in 1995 were present at the picket, with one noting to the media that they went on strike for “69 days” at that time and that there was “no reason” they could not do “90 days or more” this time around.

A June 23 company announcement reflected a degree of panic on the part of the company and union bureaucracy. It declared, “Since the vote, the Spirit team has spent the past twenty-four hours speaking with IAM representatives. We have agreed to re-engage on Saturday morning with the IAM Bargaining Committee and representatives of the IAM with the assistance of a mediator from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FCMS).”

Given the resounding “no” vote against the contract and the overwhelmingly strong position of the workers, any truly representative body of the workers would be preparing to broaden its support and put workers in the strongest possible position. Instead, the IAM is conspiring with the bosses behind closed doors, desperately working to bring a swift end to the strike.

The intervention of a federal mediator is a clear indication that the union is working to end the strike as quickly as possible and impose a pro-management settlement. The Biden administration’s intervention to block a strike by railroad workers and impose a pro-company contract shows the federal government is not a “neutral arbiter” but an agent of US capitalism.

Increasing the likelihood of federal intervention against the strike is the critical role of Spirit to the defense industry. The government simply cannot tolerate a disruption of the military supply chain, as was shown by its intervention both on the railroads and earlier this month against the dockworkers. The pro-war and nationalist bureaucrats in the IAM, which are tied by a thousand strings to US imperialism, are equally determined to prevent any disruption to the US war plans.

If workers are to win their demands, they must reject all nationalist appeals to subordinate their fight to the

US war drive. This necessitates a fight against the right-wing, nationalist IAM union bureaucracy and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by the workers.

These committees must seek to broaden the struggle to other sections of aerospace workers and to workers more broadly across the US and globally. This includes aerospace manufacturing centers in the United States, such as Texas, Oklahoma, and North Carolina, Maine, as well as internationally to plants in countries like Morocco, the United Kingdom and France to prevent production from being shifted to undermine the strike.

Fill out the form below to contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and discuss forming a rank-and-file committee:



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)