

Washington state employees walk out as momentum builds against sellout Boeing contract

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10 September 2024

Build a movement to reject this sellout and impose the will of the membership! Contact the WSWs today for information about building a rank-and-file committee at Boeing.

Thousands of Washington state employees walked off the job on Tuesday demanding higher wages, policies to reduce turnover and safe staffing levels in the lead up to their contract expiration on October 1. The state, under Democratic Governor Jay Inslee, is offering a paltry 2 percent wage increase next year and would impose further staffing cuts at a variety of state-run institutions.

The workers are part of the Washington Federation of State Employees, which has 50,000 members. They consist of government workers, public service workers and those in higher education. There were an estimated 100 protests held across the state.

One worker commented to the *Washington State Standard*, “They know the only way you recruit and retain the best people for public service is to raise pay.” She continued, “Why are they still asking us to do more with less?”

The walkouts among state employees occurred alongside massive and growing opposition among Boeing machinists in the region against a sellout contract and for a strike once their contract expires Thursday. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) has endorsed a deal which includes none of the workers’ demands—including a 40 percent wage increase, rehiring of hundreds of safety positions and restored pensions, to name a few—and lays the groundwork for even more attacks on their jobs by Boeing.

Opposition also manifested in the form of wildcat walkouts of thousands of machinists at the Boeing plant in Everett, Washington while workers played air horns and drums at Renton and Frederickson in support of a strike.

The anger over the contract is overwhelming, but it must find an organized form, completely independent of the IAM bureaucracy. The critical issue is the building of a Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee to oversee the balloting in Thursday’s vote and to enforce the 99.9 percent vote to strike by the membership.

Workers must also take control of a strike into their own

hands. Machinists should recall the two-month strike in 2008, which the IAM bureaucrats shut down with a sellout contract, a contract which they have extended for a whopping 16 years.

Indeed, District 751 President Jon Holden declared: “We recommended acceptance because we can’t guarantee we can achieve more in a strike.” This amounts to a veiled threat that the IAM bureaucrats would try to sabotage a strike.

The walkout by 50,000 public workers shows the immense potential for broader movement of the working class. Major struggles are also taking place in the global airline industry. These include:

- Massive cuts at Boeing’s main competitor Airbus, under a new program called “LEAD!” which will supposedly “save 2024” —i.e., boost the European aerospace giant’s profitability. According to Reuters, cuts will be examined “without taboo.”

- In Argentina, members of the pilots’ union walked off the job for nine hours on September 6 to take direct action against their union’s refusal to fight for wage increases that keep up with inflation. Currently, inflation in the country stands at 120 percent. The strike affected 150 flights and an estimated 15,000 passengers.

- In the United States, 10,000 Aircraft Maintenance Technicians (AMTs) for United Airlines protested at airports across the country on August 30 to demand better safety standards, improved healthcare and higher pay. While their pay has stagnated, corporate profits have skyrocketed. In 2023, United CEO Scott Kirby’s total compensation nearly doubled from \$9.8 million to \$18.6 million.

- Also in August, flight attendants at Alaska Airlines voted down a contract by 68 percent, which the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) union failed to ram through after opening the vote without the contract language even being finalized.

- And 28,000 flight attendants at American Airlines are still voting on their contract, which continues through September 12.

Late Tuesday night, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for US Vice President, issued a statement which read in part:

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US Vice President, I urge Boeing workers to reject the contract brought back by IAM District 751. I support the mass protests which workers have organized against the deal, demanding their 99.9 percent strike mandate be honored. For a real fight, workers have to organize themselves to take their struggle out of the hands of the sellout IAM bureaucrats.

The fight at Boeing is part of a growing movement of the working class against an entire social system: capitalism. This is a system of exploitation in which the wealth produced by the collective labor of workers is monopolized by a handful of oligarchs who own everything. To this, must be opposed a fight for workers' power.

Boeing is a strategically vital US defense contractor and exporter. A stand here will embolden workers everywhere. Boeing workers must appeal to the working class across the United States around the world, including 50,000 Washington state public workers who struck Tuesday, 45,000 dockworkers whose contract expires this month, striking oil refinery workers from Detroit, autoworkers, and others.

Everywhere, the working class is fighting against the same thing: the erosion of their living standards by inflation and automation driven layoffs. They are fighting for their social rights to a decent job, safe working conditions, ample time off to spend with their families, which the capitalists violate at every turn.

The scale of opposition among Boeing workers has forced District 751 President Holden to make a tactical retreat, although the IAM still is endorsing the deal. In an interview with Reuters on Monday, Holden was forced to acknowledge, "They're angry," before again claiming that what was presented was the best deal that could be achieved.

He then claimed that "The power is within our membership on the floor." But if the bureaucrats believed this, they would not have brought the contract to a vote in the first place. The balloting includes a second, unnecessary strike vote, which they are using to create a technicality to enforce the contract even if it is voted down. According to the IAM, the deal will be "ratified" regardless, if less than two-thirds of the workforce votes to strike Thursday.

"We voted 99.9 percent to go on strike [in July]," one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "so I don't know what the purpose is of having us vote again. ... This just creates more confusion."

Nevertheless, Holden was compelled to acknowledge that it appears likely the contract is headed for a massive defeat and that workers will vote again to authorize a strike.

But the opposition of the workers heightens the danger of

11th hour tricks. One possibility could come from Boeing and the IAM suddenly forcing a second vote on a "new" agreement nearly identical to the first, in order to give the bureaucracy an excuse to prevent the strike.

In a recent strike by Dakota auto parts workers in Chicago, the United Auto Workers bureaucrats forced workers to vote on the same contract five times in order to wear down their opposition. A similar tactic could be employed by the IAM.

Another possibility is the direct intervention of the Biden administration. In reality, the White House has been involved in talks from the start, with acting Labor Secretary Julie Su visiting the IAM last week.

But the White House, which has so far remained largely behind the scenes, could act more openly against Boeing workers. Such an intervention could take the form of brokering a "cooling down" period or government-backed mediation as a delaying tactic. It could also involve a direct strike ban under the Taft-Hartley Act. Both mandatory "mediation" and, ultimately, a strike ban were employed in 2022 against railroaders.

On the question of war, one worker commented to the WSWS, "They want people to be in power that will promote the wars so they can sell their weapons. But they don't consider that it will drain from the citizens, which have to pay for those wars."

Such dangers reinforce the need for workers to develop a rank-and-file committee independent of the IAM bureaucracy. As the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees wrote in a statement Monday, a committee would give workers "the power to override decisions that violate their will and prepare for a genuine struggle" and "fan out into the working class for the broadest possible support."



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