

Boeing begins furloughs in response to strike by 33,000 machinists

Bryan Dyne
20 September 2024

On Sunday, September 22, at 2:00 p.m. Pacific/5:00 p.m. Eastern, the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an online meeting to mobilize the broadest support in the working class for the 33,000 striking Boeing machinists. Register for the event by clicking here.

Aircraft manufacturer Boeing has begun to furlough its employees as part of its response to the ongoing strike by 33,000 machinists across Washington, Oregon and California. The strike began last Friday in a revolt by workers against the leadership of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which endorsed and tried to force through a pro-company tentative agreement.

Boeing employees still working received a notice about the furloughs Wednesday, which noted that it will encompass tens of thousands of nonunion employees for the duration of the strike. That includes hourly and salaried employees, as well as lower managers. The terms, reported by the *Seattle Times*, will be one unpaid week off every four weeks, starting with employees in Washington and Oregon on Friday.

Boeing executives, according to newly-installed CEO Kelly Ortberg, will only take a “commensurate pay reduction.” Ortberg claimed the furloughs were a “tough decision” to “preserve cash.”

Ortberg’s commiserations about cash flow, however, ring false in light of the scabs the company is flying in to try and break the strike. Boeing has flown in more than 400 people from Alabama, Mississippi and Texas to perform the janitorial work normally done by members of the IAM. The company also tried to get the 17,000 engineers that are part of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) to either work jobs normally done by the machinists or accept furloughs. The SPEEA membership reportedly unanimously refused to do either.

The furloughs also came the same day that negotiations between the IAM, Boeing and the federal mediator came to a standstill. While the IAM leadership claimed that “we remain open to further discussions” and Ortberg wrote “we remain committed to resetting our relationship with our employees and the union,” the real goal of both is to outlast the striking rank and file.

Boeing is already feeling the pressure of the strike. A report

from the station King5 noted Friday that the strike has cost the company about \$455 million so far or about \$65 million a day. This is on top of the \$60 billion in debt the aerospace giant has acquired over years of lawsuits and falling sales.

Management decisions to cut corners on safety and rush aircraft to service resulted in two 737 MAX 8 crashes in 2018 and 2019, leading to the deaths of 346 men, women and children, the door blowout on a 737 MAX 9 in January, and numerous other accidents and near misses since then.

Workers are determined to prevent Boeing from forcing them to pay for management’s criminal activities. They have long recognized the need to prioritize safety and lives over profit, in part one of the reasons so many Boeing whistleblowers have emerged this year. These include John “Mitch” Barnett and Joshua Dean, both of whom died under mysterious circumstances.

Indeed, one of the main demands of Boeing workers has been the reinstatement of hundreds of quality and safety positions that have been eliminated over the years.

Last Wednesday, a group of rank-and-file workers formed the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee, with one of its demands being, “Rank-and-file control over safety. No plane can be delivered without the approval of workers who built it. Workers must have the right to override any attempt to rush through inspections or cut corners.”

The committee also insists on the need to appeal to other sections of workers if their strike is to succeed. In its second statement, the committee wrote, “We cannot win this struggle alone. The strike must be expanded to all sections of Boeing workers, including the engineers in SPEEA and non-union workers at the South Carolina plant. Informational pickets should be sent to win support from dockworkers, railroaders, Washington state employees, healthcare workers, education workers.”

These themes will be expanded on and developed in the upcoming public meeting hosted by the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee this Sunday at 2:00 p.m. Pacific/5:00 p.m. Eastern. Workers and other supporters of the strike by Boeing machinists can register for the event by clicking here.

One striking worker wrote in to the *World Socialist Web Site* that Boeing should “max cap-out pay by AT LEAST 40

percent, [which] would bring Boeing's skilled laborers to the minimum wages of local commercial unionized construction laborers paid by tax-funded contracts; so a for-profit manufacturer that weekly pushes out numerous \$350 million planes, Boeing can afford it."

He continued, "They are trying to de-legitimize our jobs in order to pay us less in wages ... Reinstating the Journeyman-Apprentice structure will re-establish structured training, pride in our work, career aspirations, and encourage future generations to enter into the avionics industry."

For its part, the IAM bureaucracy has continued to starve workers out on the picket line. The meager ration of \$250 in strike benefits the union is giving out only starts on the third week of the strike (presumably next Friday). At the same time, the union's top executives are still receiving their full pay. Last year, IAM International President Robert Martinez was paid \$668,070; General Vice President Steve Galloway pocketed \$623,656 and District 751 President Jon Holden was paid \$225,000.

The union apparatus only called the strike after rank-and-file workers rejected the IAM-backed deal by 95 percent. Holden & Co. unanimously endorsed the proposal, which did not restore pensions and only included a 25 percent wage increase over four years. Boeing workers have suffered more than a decade of no raises and skyrocketing inflation due to previous IAM contract extensions.

Growing class conflict

The Boeing strike comes amid a surge of the class struggle in the US and internationally.

The contract for 45,000 dockworkers on the East Coast is set to expire at the end of September and workers are threatening to strike to fight years of declining wages and the casualization of the workforce. Thousands are day laborers with no contractual rights. Facing an insurgency similar to that at Boeing, the International Longshoremen's Association has promised a strike if there is no contract in place by September 30.

At Eaton Aerospace, 525 workers walked out on September 16 after voting down two tentative agreements brought to them by the United Auto Workers. Their main demands are to keep pensions for both newer and veteran workers and obtain better retiree healthcare. The rank-and-file is also determined to keep Eaton from implementing a two-tier wage system, similar to what has been imposed in the auto industry with the blessing of the UAW.

There is also mass opposition to the ongoing destruction of jobs in the auto industry, including the elimination of 2,500 jobs at the suburban Detroit Warren Truck plant on October 8.

In an effort to get ahead of the opposition, UAW President Shawn Fain, who signed off on the massive job cuts in last year's labor agreements, has floated the idea of a strike.

Boeing workers should appeal to thousands of workers in the Seattle area facing the same fight. This includes Alaska Airlines flight attendants who rejected a contract brought back by the leadership of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA in August that included a wage increase of only 24 percent after working under contract extensions since 2014. Flight attendants are seeking at least a 32 percent pay rise, as well as back pay and hours counted for all the time the attendants are working, not just when the airplane doors are closed.

In Seattle, teachers are facing 17 to 21 school closures, which will force almost 50 percent of Seattle's students to change schools. Class sizes are set to increase and more extracurricular programs cut. Seattle is one of hundreds of such school districts across the country, which have been hit by the cut off of federal Covid funding.

Some 380,000 educators across the country are facing the loss of their jobs, even as the Biden-Harris administration and both corporate-controlled parties are spending \$1 trillion a year on war, including arming Israel for its wanton slaughter of the Palestinians and its expanding war against Lebanon and Iran, and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

These struggles will not be united from the top, by union bureaucracies that subordinate workers to the capitalist two-party system, war and fascism. It will only be done from below, by expanding the network of rank-and-file committees and organizing an industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class.

In opposition to Trump's incitement of anti-immigrant violence, and the Biden-Harris administration's escalation of American imperialism's wars for global domination, the working class has to build a powerful political movement to take political power and transform corporate giants like Boeing into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class, as part of the socialist transformation of society.

Register for the meeting of the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee this Sunday. Join the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take up the fight for workers' control! Text (406) 414-7648 or email boeingworkersrfc@gmail.com. Alternatively, fill out the form below to be put in touch.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact