

“We need to come together as one”: Striking Eaton workers call for unity with Boeing strike

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For more than a week, over 500 workers have been on strike at the Eaton aerospace plant in Jackson, Michigan. The United Auto Workers Local 475 was forced to call a strike, despite a two-month contract extension, after workers rejected two tentative agreements. Workers are demanding secure pensions, better healthcare for current workers and retirees, and better safety conditions.

The walkout takes place amid the massive strike of 33,000 Boeing workers, primarily in the state of Washington. On Monday morning, they were joined by 5,000 Textron Aviation workers in Wichita, Kansas. Both strikes took place after rank-and-file rebellions against sellout deals being pushed by the bureaucrats of the International Association of Machinists. At Boeing, workers rejected a tentative agreement by 95 percent and voted by a similar margin to strike.

Eaton workers expressed strong support for their colleagues at Boeing, for which Eaton is also a major supplier. One striker said, “I support Boeing workers! Like them, we’re worried about the high cost of living and we’re fighting to protect younger workers 30-40 years from now.”

Another striker told the WSW: “A lot of people think we should’ve walked a long time ago. With our strike pay, we don’t know how much it is until we start to get it. I only make \$15 an hour [at Eaton]. I could go to McDonald’s and make that. It’s tough.” She added: “There should be no backroom deals by the union. There’s too much we don’t know. This is our dues money, right?”

Eaton claims that a third tentative agreement was close before workers began a strike. Local 475 President Donnie Huffman has denied this, declaring:

“I’m surprised to hear that they keep saying that. I mean, if we’re that close, why don’t they give us a counter-proposal? You know, I mean, we’ll definitely look at it, at least.”

A veteran worker responded: “The union acted like all the demands would be met one month out and then a few days before [the strike] it’s all chaos. Nothing is agreed to, it seems like a giant scam. I remember the similar stunt with the last contract. I’m worried about older workers here.”

Another veteran worker said: “They’re freezing pensions. We have a subpar 401(k), and they are proposing a subpar 16.5 percent increase in wages. The CEO is making \$20 million; all we’re asking for is a chunk of that. We have a lot of skilled workers where it takes a year to learn, then 2 to 3 years to really get good at the job.

“They think they can replace us. But what kind of worker do they think they can get for \$15 an hour? Some people might try struggling for a year to get the increase to \$25. What brought people here were the pensions, now they’re taking that away. What makes this an ideal place to work then?”

Turning to the UAW international president Shawn Fain, the worker continued: “I’m not a fan. He talked a good game, now he’s working on his political career. He sounds like our upper management here.”

Eaton is a major supplier for electrical products and government and commercial aerospace components. From switchgears to aerospace, these projects are critical for foreign policy against China’s domination over the semiconductor industry. This is the reason for Eaton’s market valuation of \$131.3 billion.

“I heard about Boeing workers with their pensions,”

another worker said. “Both of us supply parts for war. We make parts; everything from submarines, missiles, fighter jet components and helicopters. With war, we get called on. This plant is a seven-day-a-week operation. We have the luxury of not always working weekends, but we are mandated on ten hour shifts for months. I always tell my family, if you want to have family time this isn’t where you want to work. You’ll be on second or third shift for years, not months. If you want to be there with your kids, second or third is not it. They might pay well but family is important.”

He added: “Then there’s safety. Skydrol [fire resistant hydraulic fluid] and red oil are both carcinogens. Red oil vapor might not burn your lungs, but Skydrol is hard on the respiratory system. If it gets onto your skin it will burn. You need to wash with cold water to close the pores. We have a PPE protocol with gloves, face shields and aprons. But it eats through anything after some time. You take nitrile gloves and a couple of rounds testing parts and they fall apart. We need to have full movement so we can’t wear welding gloves or other protective gloves.

“There’s a vacuum in the tester that takes the vapor out. But I always know when it’s not working because it sits in my lungs. I know a guy from Boeing, and he once told me, ‘I just had a Skydrol bath today.’ With the contract proposal of \$16.50 per hour starting pay, that won’t pull people here. You have all these other companies that hire workers, who also get worked to death, they see Eaton as a pay cut. They make only \$19.”

Others spoke about the mass layoffs in auto plants in Detroit and around the world. “I heard about the Warren Truck layoffs. Here they tried to screw us at the get-go. With the TAs, the little pension and healthcare we have is being cut. Healthcare is garbage and we handle Skydrol!”

His coworker connected the strike with the broader political situation. “We build parts in the plant with traceability and now they’re bringing in scabs. Boeing is going against its own rules not tracing parts for these planes.”

“The issue is corporate America,” he continued. “I see the connection with all workers. We need to come together as one. Divided we fall, that’s what they’re trying to do, divide and conquer. They need us more than we need them, that’s why they’re bringing in

scabs. It takes nine months to get certified. Now the rules are different, I’m sure. They’re going to have to push airplane parts that are not certified. Something comes out of the sky from a plane, then what? We’re in three wars; this is going to bite them in the ass. We make parts for jets, which they’re using in Gaza and Ukraine.”

Workers at Eaton, as well as Boeing, are in a two-front war, against both management and the union bureaucracy. But they are in a powerful position, given their central role in aerospace supply chains as well as the growing strike movement in the working class.

The central question is leadership. The UAW bureaucracy has shown they stand hand in hand with the company while laying off autoworkers and enforcing the dictates of management.

Last month, Dakkota parts workers in Chicago rejected four successive tentative agreements, founding the Dakkota Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take control of the strike out of the hands of the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy. Boeing workers have done the same, issuing statements and holding a public meeting appealing for broad support in the working class.

A united fight of Boeing, Eaton and Textron workers is necessary. But this unity can be achieved only through the self-organization of the rank and file, not from the tops. An Eaton Workers Rank-and-File Committee should be formed to establish lines of contact across the industry, as well as in auto and other industries across the world.



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