

Striking Eaton Aerospace worker killed on Michigan picket line in tragic truck accident

Our reporter
30 September 2024

A striking worker at the Eaton Aerospace plant in Jackson, Michigan, was killed late Saturday night when a pickup truck racing down a city street lost control and crashed into a group of workers picketing near the factory. The victim, 24-year-old Seth Webb, worked at Eaton for about a year before the strike started, according to coworkers.

Four other striking workers were injured and two remain hospitalized, including Kyle Alger, who reportedly received life-threatening injuries. Striking workers, who are members of United Auto Workers Local 475, held a candlelight vigil and march on Sunday to honor Webb and the injured workers.

“It was senseless,” a worker with 15 years at the factory told the WSW. “The person who killed him was impaired and street racing with another truck. It was raining and he lost control and flipped, colliding into our people who were posted on the corner. What’s worse is the driver’s family works with us, and his own friend was one of the victims.

“We have one still fighting for his life who has a wife and baby waiting at his side. Kyle was next to Seth when they were hit. These boys all were friends and Seth’s brother, who works with us too, was there with him. He survived with a broken leg but lost his brother. The kid who hit them will have to live with that guilt for the rest of his life—and our town will have to live with that pain.”

She concluded, “Everyone is angry with Eaton right now. If management had just agreed to the very little we asked for, we would not have been out there, a mom would still have her child, and Kyle would be not fighting to survive.”

The 525 workers at the plant produce systems and components, hydraulic, fuel, motion control, pneumatic systems and engines for commercial and military aircraft manufacturers, including Boeing. On September 16, they walked out to demand pay increases to make up for years of eroding paychecks, to defend pensions for current and future workers, and to roll back impossibly high out-of-pocket health care costs. This followed the rejection of not one, but two UAW-backed contract proposals that failed to meet workers’ demands.

The multinational corporation, headquartered in Dublin, Ireland, made \$5 billion in profits last year, including \$780 million in its aerospace division. While resisting workers’ demands for living wages, pensions and affordable health care, the company paid its CEO Craig Arnold \$20.5 million in total compensation last year.

Over the last five years, the company has engaged in a savage downsizing and cost-cutting campaign, which has been unopposed by the UAW, the IAM and other union bureaucracies. Eaton has closed factories and wiped out thousands of jobs in Auburn, Indiana; Hastings, Nebraska; Toccoa, Georgia; Watertown, Wisconsin; Spencer and Shenandoah, Iowa; and Kings Mountain, North Carolina. In many cases, Eaton has shipped production of its auto, aircraft and residential electrical components to low-wage facilities in San Luis Potosi and Juarez, Mexico.

The dangers facing striking workers in Michigan have been exacerbated by the isolation of the two-week strike by the UAW bureaucracy.

Although the UAW, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and other unions have thousands of members at other Eaton facilities in the United States, they are keeping these workers on the job despite the ongoing strike in Michigan.

In 2022, 360 Eaton workers in Davenport, Iowa walked out after rejecting an IAM-backed contract proposal with below-inflation raises and increased health care costs. But the IAM bureaucracy isolated the strike for more than a month and kept workers on starvation-level strike benefits, before imposing a barely revised five-year agreement.

The conditions for rank-and-file workers to break through the isolation of the strike are rapidly emerging.

More than 33,000 Boeing workers have been on strike since September 13, and 5,000 Textron Aviation workers in Wichita, Kansas, walked out on September 23. Like the Eaton strike, the Boeing and Textron walkouts began after rank-and-file workers rejected IAM-backed sellout contracts. Workers at Boeing voted down the IAM’s deal by a massive 95 percent.

In addition, 45,000 dockworkers on East Coast and Gulf ports are set to strike at midnight Monday night.

“We’re not the only ones out here fighting for what we need to be able to live”

Addressing herself to Boeing workers, one striking worker at Eaton said, “We support you and glad we’re not the only ones fighting for this. So, we appreciate that when we see you guys, we know we’re not the only ones out here fighting for what we need to be able to live on a day-to-day basis.”

Explaining the central issues in the strike, she said, “Our out-of-pocket medical costs are outrageous. We’re spending \$1,000 a month for the family plan, and then on top of that, we have a \$9,000 deductible we have to reach before the company’s insurance will cover 100 percent of our health care costs. It’s not feasible, not with our current pay increases plus the cost of living.”

The worker said starting wages were around \$16.50 an hour, and someone had to work a full year before earning \$21 an hour. “At that rate, plus what your health care is, especially if you’re on the family plan, that’s \$30,000 a year that you’re just spending on health care if you’re reaching your max out of pocket by December. When my child has to go get blood work done, that’s \$600 out of pocket I have to pay because the insurance doesn’t cover it.”

Housing prices in the area are also largely out of reach. “It’s gross. I was lucky, I bought my house before inflation hit and rates went up. But other people I work with that have recently purchased homes, they’re spending almost \$200,000 on a home that five or six years ago would have been only \$70,000.”

She continued, "If the company would have just done what we asked, we wouldn't be sitting here. They're spending more on bussing the salary people and scabs into the building than what it would have cost them just to give us what we asked for."

The worker said that Eaton is a global corporation and that the aerospace components manufactured at the Michigan plant are also produced by workers in Bangalore, India, Tijuana, Mexico and a facility in Turkey.

"I know they pay their Tijuana workers pennies to the dollar. That's not okay for them to do the same work that we do. The cost of living might be cheaper down there, but the wear and tear on a human's body and their mind is the same. They can work them 13-14 hours a day and get away with it. That's not okay. We should be working towards the same goal, and they should be getting paid as much as us."

WSWS reporters discussed the role of UAW President Shawn Fain and the union bureaucracy in selling out the 2023 contract battle at GM, Ford and Stellantis, which has led to an acceleration of job cuts, including the planned layoff of 2,500 Stellantis workers at the Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit on October 8. The mass job cuts across the Big Three have exposed the lies by Fain and other UAW officials that the contracts were "job creating."

"I'm a little confused," the worker said. "If the floor workers aren't agreeing to it, how are they able to do that? Because your floor workers, they're the ones that hold the power. They hold the cards on what can get approved and not approved. So that's a little confusing."

WSWS reporters explained that the UAW had forced Dakkota Systems workers in Chicago to vote five times on a contract, only ramming it through on the last vote. At Boeing, the IAM officials were trying to starve workers into submission with strike benefits of only \$250 a week, while the IAM International president continued to collect his \$668,000 salary.

"That's kind of the situation here," the striking worker said. "So, with us, they basically just gave us the same contract multiple times. Only a few little different things were changed, but at the end of the day, it's still the same contract. Nothing really changed."

She continued: "They offered a \$400 increase on our signing bonus, which essentially isn't even a bonus. We didn't get a pay raise this year, so that's basically our pay raise that's going to get taxed at a gift tax rate. So that's what 37 percent because it's under \$5,000. So, we'd be lucky to see two grand?"

"This worker would still be alive if this multi-billion-dollar company had not provoked the strike"

Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US vice president, visited the picket lines several hours before the tragic accident. Having recently returned from Seattle and speaking with striking Boeing workers, White explained that workers had to build a movement from below to fight because the UAW, IAM and other union bureaucracies were aligned with the corporations and the Biden-Harris administration. The White House was using the union apparatus to enforce labor discipline on the home front so it could expand American imperialism's wars for global domination throughout the world, White said to workers.

An Eaton worker said she was concerned about the danger of world war. "When I saw the US giving weapons to Ukraine, I said, we're heading to World War III. Instead of spending money on war and controlling the world, we should be worrying about what is happening here. I mean, we've got people that are homeless. It's not by choice, it's because they've lost their jobs because of downsizing. They can't afford to maintain living in a home that maybe they previously owned, but they lost

because they couldn't afford the taxes or insurance on it."

"You've got an employee here who is 80 years old, but people can't retire because they can't afford it. That's because the company is not matching what we're paying out for our medical and then they want to take the pension from them. They can't afford to retire because of what they're paying out on their medical bills."

In the course of a discussion with a group of workers, White responded to one who was influenced by Trump's efforts to incite anti-immigrant violence against Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio.

White said the American ruling class had long sought to pit workers against each other to divide and weaken the working class, including in the 19th and early 20th centuries. "If they can attack workers who come from a different country, they're going to come and attack native born workers who strike," White said. "They're going to say, 'You're un-American, you're hurting the American economy and the war effort.'"

"Yeah, plenty of immigrants were undocumented back then," one worker responded. "That's how my great grandmother ended up here exactly."

Another worker acknowledged that immigrant workers who came to America during that period were "all treated like dogs" and pitted against each other. He said before coming to Eaton he had worked at an auto parts factory, which was raided by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. The company, he said, exploited Mexican immigrants for cheap labor and was "able to put the American citizens through the same torture; they treated them all the same: low wages, ungodly hours that were mandatory."

Addressing himself to the Boeing workers, another striker told White, "The Boeing workers are not only fighting for their own families, they're fighting for the future of younger employees. The more we give up, the dimmer our future gets. The cost of living goes up, and basically, we turn into the poor working class. You know, the American dream was to get a house and two cars and a nice family. You can't even afford the house and one car, even with both parents working.

"The corporations are just sucking that up, feeding their stockholders, like here at Eaton. They want to use the money they save from getting rid of our pensions to start an electric vehicle battery division. That should be going to pay for my retirement. That should be going for paying for the future of our people. So that's why I don't agree with it. That's why I'll stay out here every day until I have to."

After news of the tragedy was reported, White issued the following statement on X:

On Saturday night, a 24-year-old striking worker at the Eaton Aerospace plant in Jackson, Michigan, Seth Webb, was tragically killed when a pickup truck involved in a drag race on a city street lost control and struck workers picketing the corporation. Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore and I express our deepest condolences to family, friends and co-workers of Webb and those who were also seriously injured.

This worker would still be alive if this multi-billion-dollar company had not provoked the strike by refusing to provide workers with living wages, pensions and affordable health care. Eaton made \$5 billion in profits last year and paid its CEO Craig Arnold \$20.5 million in total compensation last year.

But the danger to striking workers has been exacerbated by the deliberate isolation of their struggle by Shawn Fain and the rest of the UAW bureaucracy, which has twice failed to force workers to accept a pro-company contract they cannot live with. Fain & Co. are aligned with the Biden-Harris administration, which is using the union bureaucracies to suppress opposition at home while it wages war abroad.

Rank-and-file workers must break the isolation of this strike and rally to the defense of the Eaton workers. Strike action must be organized across all the company's North American operations until this struggle is won. At the same time, the SEP urges Eaton workers to follow the lead of the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee and take the conduct of the struggle into your own hands, so you can unite with Boeing, Marathon, Textron, dock and other workers to win this critical battle.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact