Boeing strikers denounce “fear tactics” after company announces layoff of 10 percent of global workforce

Tom Hall, Diana Green, Paul Fuller
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Striking Boeing workers remained determined on the picket line over the weekend, after the company announced Friday it would lay off 10 percent of its global workforce, or 17,000 people. The move was a calculated provocation against the 33,000 workers mainly in the state of Washington who have been on strike for four weeks.

The company is taking such a hard line because it is determined to force workers to pay the cost of the crisis of the massive safety scandal, driven by corporate cost-cutting, which has led to continuous fatal and near-fatal incidents on Boeing jetliners.

In this, the company has the support of the government. In comments to the press last week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg made clear the White House wants the strike shut down as soon as possible.

The company’s arrogant hardline position on the strike is mirrored by its position on a settlement amounting to a pathetic $244 million, a drop in the bucket for a company with nearly $80 billion in revenues last year. That settlement is being challenged by the families of passengers who died in two Boeing 737 MAX crashes.

In court Friday, a federal judge asked the attorney for Boeing “why he should accept the prepackaged plea deal and a sentence negotiated by a defendant,” according to an account in the Associated Press (AP). The attorney replied that Boeing “is a pillar of the national economy and the national defense.

“All the employees of the company, the shareholders of the company and a global and national supply chain … all of those are put into doubt if the sentencing” is in doubt, he continued.

The AP observed: “The answer stunned and angered relatives of the victims,” citing one relative who told reporters: “Boeing is too important for the economy—they’re too big to jail. That’s what he’s saying. … It allows them to kill people with no consequences because they’re too big and because their shareholders won’t like it.”

This underscores the need for workers to adopt a new strategy. The fight cannot remain in the hands of the bureaucrats of the International Association of Machinists, who did not want the strike and are trying to starve workers out on the picket line with $250 a week in strike pay.

The Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee must be built as a new, democratic leadership in opposition to the bureaucracy, based on a strategy of mobilizing the working class against inequality and capitalist exploitation. The unaccountable power of massive corporations like Boeing must be broken and their operations transformed into public entities, run by workers in the interests of society and not Wall Street.

The WSWS spoke with a Boeing worker picketing outside the Everett facility. On the announced layoffs, she said, “I have been speaking with some of my coworkers who work in some of the other plants, and a lot of them are really upset by this.” This was “fear tactics” on Boeing’s part, she said.

“Boeing has manipulated the narrative to make it seem like we don’t really have any other option other

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than ending the strike.

"The petty moves, like the 10 percent layoffs, the company does not need to do that. I mean, they're worth what, $93 billion? They have a lot of worthless assets worth liquidating over this."

When asked if the company may grow to be desperate enough to "liquidate" assets to resolve the strike, the worker replied, "Desperate for a billionaire looks like, whenever you're going down, don't do anything to correct, but rather make sure that everyone else comes down with you."

She expects the strike to continue for months. "I think that the company will let it go through January, maybe early February."

Other employers are offering wages that outpace Boeing by a wide margin. "[Boeing] doesn't pay nearly as well as some of the other jobs that are in the area that don't require the same qualifications. I saw a community transit worker that drives by all the time, always showing support. It's hiring at $29.80 for something that's around the same qualifications that I'm doing. It's kind of wild; if I didn't like airplanes so much I would not be working here."

She continued, "Aviation is one of those big passions for me. I always wanted to be on the team that designs them, that makes those really amazing experiences for pilots, just sitting in their flight deck with all of these tools that they have to control different aspects of the flight, like the ergonomics, the comfort for the passengers; that seems like a really exciting problem for me."

But, she said, "If I had a choice, I would be working at Airbus, somewhere in France; I just like their airplanes much better. That was before all the quality problems at Boeing.

"I'm in my early 20s. I always figured I wouldn't be able to retire, but then I learned what a pension was and then I learned that we lost it in 2014. So I'm thinking, this is something that I need to start thinking about now. A 401k seems a lot more volatile than I would like it to be. A pension is steady. That's giving youth a future, that's giving old age a security. I don't think I'm gonna be staying at Boeing for the rest of my life, but I still would fight for this. Because if it's not me working here 10 years from now, it's going to be someone else. They need to have better opportunities than I have right now."

She spoke about the end of the recent dockworkers' strike, which was shut down after three days without a new contract following an intervention by the White House. "I don't like that precedent one bit. You couldn't trust [the government]; I mean after they banned the railroad workers from strike."

She also spoke about the genocide in Gaza, which is being equipped with weapons manufactured by Boeing. "I really wish that our union had the spine to stand up to Boeing and say, none of our weapons need to be going down there. But first of all, the leadership doesn't have the spine for that. … You could not pay me to work in Boeing's [defense division]. 'It's demoralizing' is putting it lightly. We can barely keep a strike going for our own wages, for our future.

"I'm just dumbfounded by how willfully incompetent the [IAM] leadership is being. We're doing one rally next Tuesday. I literally just heard about it on Thursday. They clearly don't want to have an effective strike. They've been getting in the way of us actually delivering a powerful message to the company, a message that I think should be a lot more fierce than just waving at cars.

"You see that green line?" she asked, pointing to the line on the pavement marking the perimeter around the main entrance. "We should all be lined up."

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