“The planes would not be built without labor”: Striking Boeing workers speak out after rejecting sellout contract

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On Wednesday, 33,000 striking Boeing machinists voted to reject a contract proposal, which would have ended their 6 week strike, by 64 percent. Workers took a stand against a sellout, worked out with the involvement of the White House, which fell far short of their demands, including 40 percent wage increases and the restoration of company pensions.

This was the second contract workers rejected which had been brought to a vote by the bureaucracy of the International Association of Machinists. In September, workers voted down an even worse deal by 95 percent, forcing the IAM to call the strike.

The struggle has now reached its next phase. As the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee declared in its statement calling for a “no” vote, “We have to appeal to workers all over the world, not just for moral solidarity but for a fighting unity, answering the corporate conspiracy against our strike with the massive power of the working class.”

“If anything has been proven over the past month,” they concluded, “it is that the chief obstacle to our unity is the dictatorship of the bureaucracy in the unions. We have to connect a broad appeal with a rank-and-file rebellion to transfer power from the apparatus to workers ourselves.”

One worker, explaining why they had rejected the deal, told the WSWS: “The higher-ups got 45 percent raises over the last 10 years; we are asking for a 40 percent raise on max that has not changed in 16 years.

“It’s not ‘greed,’ because we see that [former CEO David] Calhoun is asked to step-down with $75 million for being the fall-guy to mismanagement of the board. Almost all labor Unions in the Puget Sound area make Journeyman wages between $60 and $74 per hour, and they are mostly paid through government contracts. A for-profit corporation is expected to meet at least the minimum of that scale for unionized labor contracts.

“To our understanding, hourly wages only account for 5 percent of Boeing’s overhead … which is insulting because the planes would not be built without labor. So 5 percent investment supports 95 percent of the company?”

The worker also spoke on the difficulties of living off of Boeing’s wages over the past decade. “The pay progression structure is based on the career skilled labor’s apprenticeship/journeyman structure. By maintaining that culture, it is assumed that Boeing wants to retain ‘lifers.’ The problem with that is that in order to commit your lifelong career to Boeing, they need to accommodate for the sustainable median wage for this region in order for people to stay in this region!

“Furthermore, one employee would need to yield half of a household income to purchase a home in the region that they work in, in order for them to have a stable home environment to remain a reliable career-employee in this region.

“The median income is $108,000 in this area. Banks are asking $250,000 annual income to purchase a home with zero to 10 percent down. Thus, you would need $125,000 in individual salary for a traditional household.”

According to the website in2013dollars.com, price increases in Seattle from 2008 to 2024, the length of the machinists’ previous contract with Boeing, were 56.71

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percent, significantly higher than the national average.

Workers on social media also expressed concern about the lack of additional paid time off. One noted, “I talked with a bunch of people during the strike and a bunch of people at the vote yesterday. This seems to be most people’s top priority away from the pension people. I have a 3- and a 4-year-old at home, my son should be starting T-ball next year, I want to be able to coach and be there for my kids like my dad was.

“Most people just burn through the little time they have of PTO and sick leave, then they come to work sick and get everyone else sick because the stupid LWOP [leave without pay] system will get them fired if they don’t show. It’s literally a cesspool at work of sick people every time the seasons change, it’s disgusting and not right. This needs to get addressed, a workplace of sick people doesn’t make a quality product, it’s for our best interest and the company’s.”

There is also widespread support for Boeing workers among broader sections of the working class, which see the fight at Boeing as their fight. A victory by workers at Boeing, particularly on the question of pensions, would galvanize other sections of workers to fight for the same and begin a broader counteroffensive of the working class against wages, pensions and benefits stolen by the corporations over the past four decades.

Andrew, a skilled-trade autoworker at Stellantis in the Detroit area, said, “I’m glad to see Boeing workers vote ‘no.’

“Here the UAW is trying to pit workers at Warren Truck against workers in Belvidere. They are trying to whipsaw us against Canada too with the Dodge Durango. Its divide and conquer.”

Speaking of the Boeing workers he said, “I am 100 percent in agreement with them. I think we have to get the word out.

“I think a lot of people are waking up to the fact that many are homeless and cannot afford groceries because of prices being sky high. Corporations don’t care.

“It means that workers are no longer going to fall for the good-old-boy system of union management partnership.

“They should get back pensions! Why not? The companies have shown they have the money because of all the money they have paid out to shareholders and stock manipulation, but they are not investing in the company.”

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