

Boeing machinist exposes ongoing safety problems following last year's strike

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Boeing workers: tell us what conditions have been at your workplace since the end of the strike by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A strike of 33,000 Boeing machinists ended last year after a sellout contract was forced through by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) bureaucracy. In spite of the power of the strike, the IAM's betrayal meant that none of the workers' key demands were met. This includes: inflation-busting wage increases, the restoration of company pensions and genuine improvements in the quality control measures to ensure the aircraft produced are never again involved in tragedies such as the 737 MAX 8 crashes in 2018 and 2019 that killed 346 passengers and crew.

Among the widespread distrust and opposition to the IAM officialdom, the most developed was the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee. In a statement at the climax of the strike, when the IAM forced through a third and final contract, the committee declared: "It has become absolutely clear that if we are to win this strike, we have to overthrow the dead weight of the IAM union bureaucracy ... we have to organize to assert that **we the workers** are the power in this strike, not the bureaucracy. We have to transfer power from the corporate stooges to the rank and file."

Even during the strike, Boeing announced it was cutting 17,000 jobs, an issue sharply opposed by the rank and file but which was not raised once by the IAM bureaucracy. To date, there have been at least 2,600 layoffs in Washington alone.

The attacks on workers will only accelerate now that Boeing has avoided criminal prosecution for the MAX 8 crashes after agreeing to a sweetheart plea deal with the federal government in which Boeing will pay a paltry \$1.3 million per death.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with one of the machinists who opposed the sellout contract, Jordan, about their thoughts on the deal, as well as the broader issues of safety and quality that are still pervasive within the company. Their name has been changed to protect them from retaliation from the company and the IAM bureaucracy.

WSWS: What has work been like at Boeing since the end of the strike?

Jordan: Management is just pushing the agenda to get the planes out the door, to get your job done as fast as you can.

Boeing doesn't really care about the safety of the employees. They don't care about what happens when you walk out the door and go home to your families. They don't care about much other than just get the product delivered. They don't care how it's delivered. They don't care about the quality of the product you're delivering.

WSWS: What quality and safety issues have emerged in the past several months?

Jordan: If one person logs onto the job at a time, it's only charging the customer and the company for that one person. But for my job working in a wheel well, it's usually three or four people that need to log into that job. But the managers want only one person to log into that job and only charge that one person eight hours instead of the 16 to 32 hours out of the day.

This basically saves the company money on the surface, but underneath it's really costing a lot more money to build that plane. The man hours that are actually going into it are astronomical compared to what they're putting on paper.

We have a lot of issues where when we have defects that roll through the assembly line, instead of stopping it—which is what we've asked them to do in the past when you have major defects—they continue the assembly line and build over where those planes or those parts were supposed to be installed.

Usually what happens is, it's a snowball effect. You get all these other problems that arise. Plus when you have to remove all the different parts that have been installed over top of wherever that part was that wasn't installed, chances are you're going to damage a lot more of whatever it is that's coming out. New parts are going to have to be ordered and installed.

The dollar amount that goes into fixing the plane as it's going down the assembly line from having issues like that has got to be in the millions per plane. For some reason, that doesn't seem to bother them. But the bigger issue should be the quality of the planes that we're building, and the integrity of those parts is declining at an even faster rate.

WSWS: How do you think the production process should be organized?

Jordan: We've asked so many different times: let the machinists be the ones who design the production. If we were

the ones who actually designed this production facility and this production system, we wouldn't have to change it so much because we're the ones that work in it every day. We want it to be efficient.

There used to be things on the 737 called AIWs (Assembly Instruction Worksheets). They would bring people in to re-sequence and redesign the build. All that was driven by the machinists. Machinists would go and sit in a room, team leads from every flow day and area would go in there, and they would bring the people in that actually did the jobs and they would re-sequence jobs and move them around.

It was actually kind of beautiful to watch because it was people working and networking with one another to design how we built our plane and how the jobs were designed. And we did that. They let us do that. That was when it was most efficient—when we were able to do that.

As soon as they took that out of our hands and they stopped having these things, our design system here in Renton just went down the hole. It's so much worse now because we didn't design it. The old system was built on us. This new system they have is built on somebody who comes out and takes numbers based on how long they think I actually worked in that wheel well area and they go and put it into a computer system. And that tells them how our job should be designed.

WSWS: How have all these changes impacted workers' health?

Jordan: I'm a single parent with three children, one who's in college and two who need regular medical care. And since we lost the pension, and our healthcare keeps getting cut, there are no resources to help take care of them or recover our losses from the past 10 years.

I have the knees of an 85-year-old man and I'm 45. We used to be able to sit down and take micro breaks on the shop floor. They don't have anywhere for us to sit now.

Our facility is huge—three or four football fields stuffed inside, and that's just one side of the building. You have to walk maybe 300-400 feet away to get to a bathroom and then up a flight of stairs. You can't sit down anywhere on the lower level where the production facility is.

WSWS: What has the IAM's role been throughout the years of stagnating wages and cut benefits?

Jordan: When the third vote for the 2012 contract happened, after it had been voted down twice, I was with my family in Disneyland when they voted on taking our pensions away. Most of us weren't around for that vote. It ended up with only one and a half percent of the membership voting. The union essentially concocted a scenario in which all of the bureaucrats would be around, and no one else would be because everyone's on vacation during Christmas.

I voted against the latest contract because the union promised we'd get our pensions back, but once Boeing dug their heels in, they folded completely. The new wages are barely enough to get by and there are still a lot of production problems.

I actually tried to call the union and talk to them about a safety issue. The union just brushed me off and said they gave me to the health and safety administrator for the union. When I called and told them that I had this run-in with the manager, she just brushed me off and said that she didn't want to hear any of what I had to say.

She said if there was an actual complaint, the manager would file it, it would go to HR, and then they could call a union steward and rep in. I really just wanted somebody to talk to because we're just trying to do a job and make sure people who fly on our planes go home safely to their children and their families.

The union has even threatened people with paying extra dues if they raise complaints. I also think it may have been how they got votes in 2012, especially among my coworkers who are from Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos. They all have families overseas they are trying to help, and it wouldn't surprise me if many of them were intimidated into voting the way the union wanted.

WSWS: You've read some of the material on the death of Ronald Adams Sr., an autoworker who was crushed by a gantry while on the job. How do you see the connection between the fight for safety at an auto plant and at Boeing plants?

Jordan: We've had people here where they literally have passed out or died. When I first hired in, a guy died early in the morning—he had just clocked in and had a heart attack. By the time the aid unit got there, one of the managers said, "We need to check to see if he had already badged in or if he was off the clock," because there's a difference in the payout to his family if he was on the clock versus if he wasn't.

That was an early indicator of how non-valuable we are, in the eyes of the company. Really, these places don't run without us. They need us more than we need them. They can hire a hundred managers, but really, we only need one of them. You can't replace the hundred people on the floor to build the plane. But that's how these corporations think nowadays. To them, we're just numbers.

At times you feel incredibly helpless and like nobody cares when you come to work. That's why I think the rank-and-file investigation into [Ron Adams'] death is really important.

It is nice to see that there are people out there fighting for us. For me, seeing that you guys have a publication and a leg to stand on does give a voice to those of us that feel like we're unheard a lot of the time and have for many years now—it's nice to see that people are actually fighting for the working class.



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