

# Striking Boeing defense workers reject third contract, defy corporate strikebreaking and IAM sabotage

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In a powerful display of determination, striking Boeing defense workers in St. Louis voted down a third tentative agreement in their six-week struggle. More than 3,200 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) District 837 rejected the deal in a snap vote on Friday, orchestrated by the union bureaucracy in an effort to shut down the strike.

The outcome is a sign of mounting opposition across the American working class. It follows recent walkouts at GE Aerospace, Libbey Glass and among nurses in Grand Blanc, Michigan. Workers are being driven into struggle by intolerable living and working conditions, the product of the vast social inequality enforced by the corporate and financial oligarchy.

For Boeing workers, the critical next step is to take the initiative out of the hands of the sellout union apparatus and prepare for a broader mobilization, uniting Boeing's entire workforce in St. Louis, the Seattle area, and throughout the aerospace industry as a whole.

The stakes in this fight are immense. The St. Louis defense plants produce fighter jets and missiles for the US military and for export to Washington's allies. Workers are therefore in direct conflict not only with Boeing but with the entire capitalist political system. With President Donald Trump openly threatening to deploy the National Guard into US cities, the same weaponry now used on the battlefields of Gaza, Ukraine and beyond is being prepared for use against the American working class.

The latest contract was, in many respects, worse than the agreement workers overwhelmingly rejected in July. That deal offered a 20 percent general wage increase over four years. The new proposal extended the term to five years and raised the total to 24 percent, amounting to less on average per year. After an initial 8 percent increase in the first year,

annual raises would be just 4 percent, under conditions where inflation is expected to accelerate due to the US trade war and mounting recessionary pressures.

The contract also dangled bonuses equal to 5 percent of pay in years two and four, but only for workers already at the top rate. This excluded the vast majority of the workforce, who remain locked in Boeing's Byzantine wage progression system. Even after a decade on the job, many workers have yet to reach the top tier.

In addition, the signing bonus was slashed from \$5,000 to \$4,000, a deliberate provocation. Management had previously threatened to eliminate it altogether.

Boeing has already begun hiring permanent replacement workers, a naked act of strikebreaking. While workers have not been cowed, management's arrogance rests on its confidence in the collaboration of the IAM bureaucracy. From the start, union officials opposed the strike, fearing any disruption to their comfortable ties with the company and the political establishment.

But workers forced the strike with overwhelming rejections of the company's offers and authorization votes. Their defiance follows last year's semi-rebellion by over 30,000 Boeing civilian workers in the Seattle area, who carried out a monthlong strike despite IAM opposition.

Since the walkout began, the IAM has effectively abandoned Boeing defense workers. With nearly \$300 million in net assets and \$200 million in annual expenditures, most of which is consumed by six-figure salaries for union executives, the IAM has left strikers to scrape by on just \$200 a week in strike pay. The national leadership has issued only a handful of statements, nothing in response to Boeing's open threats to replace the workforce and has done nothing to mobilize the rest of the union's 500,000 members.

The way the latest contract was brought forward underscores the IAM's treachery. Announced only on Wednesday, the snap vote was held Friday morning.

Whether or not union officials genuinely expected the deal to pass, their aim was to test how much workers' resolve had been worn down by weeks of hardship.

The rejection produced scenes of elation in the union hall when the results were announced. The IAM leadership, scrambling to contain the mood, issued statements claiming to stand with the rank and file. "Our members in St. Louis have once again shown that they will not settle for Boeing's half-measures," declared IAM International President Brian Bryant. "Our members will always have the final say in their futures," echoed District 837 Directing Business Representative Tom Boelling.

These are lies. The contract rejection is a serious setback for the IAM apparatus, which will now regroup and redouble its efforts to push through another sellout. Rather than organize the expansion of the strike to other Boeing facilities and the aerospace industry more broadly, the IAM will seek to keep St. Louis workers isolated on the picket lines until they are starved into submission. The presentation now of three tentative agreements shows that that they will continue to force workers to vote on contracts as bad or worse than the one before until they "get it right."

Workers face ruthless opponents. Boeing's management has already demonstrated its criminality, responsible for hundreds of deaths in crashes of its commercial airliners due to its deliberate flouting of safety rules. On Thursday, the Federal Aviation Administration announced that Boeing faces a \$3.3 million fine after uncovering hundreds of quality violations at its 737 factory in Renton, Washington, and at Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kansas. The FAA reported that Boeing had presented two unairworthy aircraft for certification and violated its own internal safety regulations.

Boeing also enjoys the support of Wall Street, which has backed its efforts to make workers shoulder the cost of the company's crisis. While Boeing's stock price dipped 2 percent on Thursday following reports of further delays to its 777X aircraft, markets appear to have ignored Friday's announcement of the contract rejection.

That backing includes the full weight of the Pentagon and the White House. Last August, IAM leaders themselves called for Trump to intervene in the strike, cynically presenting this as being in the interests of workers. In reality, such an "intervention" would take the same form as Trump's militarized crackdowns in Washington D.C. and Los Angeles: repression of workers.

The danger of government action is heightened by Trump's cultivation of support from the union bureaucracy itself. The UAW and the Teamsters, both of which back Trump, are seeking to integrate themselves ever more closely into his administration.

UAW President Shawn Fain, who has vocally supported ramping up war production to levels unseen since World War II, declared in a livestream on Thursday that the union was moving towards a tentative agreement to shut down the GE Aerospace strike. In other words, a parallel betrayal is being prepared.

The American war machine requires its fighter jets and missiles, and the ruling class will not allow Boeing defense workers to interrupt this for long. But any government "settlement" will be on the company's terms, to prevent encouraging resistance among other sections of workers.

The way forward lies not in appeals to the IAM bureaucracy but in mobilizing the power of the working class itself. The rejection vote has posed sharply the need for workers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

This means the formation of rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the IAM apparatus, to demand increased strike pay of \$800 a week, full transparency and workers' control over all negotiations, and the organization of "flying pickets" to other major workplaces in the St. Louis area.

Defense workers in St. Louis must also make a direct appeal to Boeing civilian workers in Seattle and elsewhere. These workers, who saw their own strike sabotaged last year by the IAM bureaucracy, would respond enthusiastically to a genuine call for joint action. They confront the same company, the same corrupt union apparatus, and the same corporate and political enemies.

The Boeing strike is part of a broader movement by the working class against inequality, exploitation and repression. It is essential to mobilize workers across industries, in the US and internationally, to confront the power of Wall Street and the capitalist state.



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