

Boeing defense strike in danger as AFL-CIO president visits St. Louis

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AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler traveled to St. Louis, Missouri on Wednesday to speak at a rally called by the International Association of Machinists, whose 3,200 members in the area's defense plants have been on strike against Boeing for nearly two months. Other top officials in attendance included IAM president Brian Bryant and Jon Holden, a top leader of IAM Local 751 in Seattle.

Only a small handful of people were in attendance at the rally, in spite of the determined stand taken by the strikers, who have rejected three consecutive sellout contracts. But while few workers took note of her visit, Shuler was there primarily to help IAM bureaucrats shut the strike down.

The presence of Bryant and Holden drove this home. Last year, these and other IAM bureaucrats sold out a strike by more than 30,000 commercial airplane Boeing workers. That strike, like the one in St. Louis, took the form of a semi-rebellion against the union apparatus, with workers rejecting numerous contracts and organizing spontaneous rallies to demand strike action. Afterwards, the company announced 17,000 layoffs worldwide, even as it continues to rake in new manufacturing contracts worth tens of billions.

The Boeing strike is at a decisive phase. Either workers throw out the corrupt apparatus and build a new leadership, organized in a rank-and-file strike committee and based on a strategy for victory, or the bureaucracy will end the strike with a betrayal.

On Monday, talks restarted under a federal mediator. The same day, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Pentagon was demanding defense contractors double, and even quadruple missile production in some cases. The St. Louis plants produce the critical F-15 and F-18 fighter jets, advanced drones and the upcoming F-47 next generation stealth fighter.

The union bureaucracy, Boeing and the Trump government are converging to force the strikers back to work. The company has already begun hiring permanent replacements, and last week they announced it would relocate its F-18 Service Life Modification program away from St. Louis. Management implausibly claims the move is unrelated to the strike.

The involvement of federal mediators means the involvement of a government that is carrying out plans for dictatorship. On Tuesday, Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth spoke to a crowd of hundreds of generals, and declared that the military will be ordered to send troops to American cities to crush the "enemy within." Trump is also using the government shutdown, which began early Wednesday morning, to fire hundreds of thousands of federal workers and seize control over the budget from Congress.

The fight of the working class against corporate oligarchy, inequality and exploitation must become connected to a political struggle against dictatorship and war. The ruling class fears that the stand taking by Boeing workers, in a strike which raises fundamental political issues, could encourage resistance by workers elsewhere and even escape the control of the IAM bureaucracy. Indeed, St. Louis is one of the cities subject to possible military deployment, with Union Pacific's CEO asking Trump to send troops to the critical rail hub.

On Wednesday, Shuler issued a statement on the AFL-CIO's website which parroted the line of the Democratic Party, ignoring the threat of dictatorship and presenting the shutdown as solely about reversing some nominal amount of Medicaid cuts. In the end, she pathetically asked Trump to reverse himself, writing, "The labor movement's message to the administration is clear: Get to work. Fund the government. Fix the

health care crisis. Put working people first.” The pathetic, cringing appeal to Trump to “put working people first” will obviously fall on deaf ears.

It was in order to buttress the efforts of the IAM in particular, who have thus far failed to shut down the strike in spite of their best efforts, that Shuler traveled from the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington D.C. to Missouri. It recalls the visit in July by AFSCME President Lee Saunders to the Philadelphia municipal workers strike, which was winning mass support and had effectively torpedoed the city’s marquee Fourth of July event. The following day, the strike was called off in the dead of night.

The IAM is resorting to even more underhanded methods. On September 19th, District 837 held a “pre-ratification” vote on a contract that did not even exist, because Boeing had not agreed to it. It was approved by a 90 to 10 margin, but according to St. Louis Public Radio, IAM Resident General Vice President Jody Bennett said the modified agreement reallocated some funds but kept the overall package.

As the WSWS previously warned, “any ‘pre-ratified’ contract will undoubtedly be subject to hidden revisions with the company, allowing Boeing and the IAM to make backroom deals after workers have supposedly approved the agreement.”

On Tuesday, Boeing sent a new contract offer to the IAM via federal mediators. Without providing any details of the proposal, Bennett called the agreement “*within the parameters* [emphasis added] of the pre-ratified agreement approved by our membership” on Sept. 19.

This suggests the IAM may try to call off the strike without holding a vote or allowing workers to see the details, on the grounds that it is “within the parameters” of the “pre-ratified” deal. “Within the parameters” means not similar, and that the IAM bureaucrats are asking workers to take their word that the differences are trivial.

The central issue now is how Boeing workers respond. As the WSWS has stressed, a genuine struggle requires the creation of new organizations, independent of the IAM and all the pro-corporate unions. Rank-and-file strike committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers themselves, must be established.

These committees can link defense workers with Boeing’s commercial plants, coordinate actions across

the industry, and connect with workers across Boeing’s operations and at other defense contractors. They can unite with autoworkers, educators, logistics and health care workers—all confronting the same alliance of corporations, the state and the union bureaucracy.

By expanding the struggle and breaking through the isolation imposed by the IAM, workers can fight not only for higher wages, job security and safe conditions, but to carry forward a political struggle against the profit system itself. Their demands point inevitably to the necessity of overthrowing capitalism and reorganizing society on the basis of human need rather than private profit.

The Boeing strike poses the most fundamental questions before the working class. Workers are told they must accept endless sacrifices in order to fund Washington’s wars abroad and guarantee corporate profits at home. Every maneuver by the union apparatus to contain and wind down the strike expresses its integration into the capitalist state and its hostility to an independent movement of the working class.

The alternative lies in the conscious initiative of the workers themselves. Rank-and-file committees must be established in every Boeing plant, linking defense workers with autoworkers, teachers, logistics and healthcare workers, all confronting the same alliance of corporations, the state and the union bureaucracy.

We urge all Boeing workers who agree with this perspective to contact the WSWS, study its program, and join the fight for an independent leadership of the working class. This is the path not only to defend jobs and wages, but to oppose the drive to world war and secure the future for working people everywhere.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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