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USA

Workers Strike Boeing, Stopping Production of the 173

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In an angry, determined, yet festive action, with music blaring, airhorns blasting, and fireworks shooting into the sky, 33,000 Boeing workers walked out on strike at plants in Washington, Oregon, and California on September 13, stopping production of the Boeing 737 plane and other aircraft. The Boeing strike by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the biggest strike of this year so far, is principally over wages and pensions.

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Boeing offered workers a 25% wage increase, but 94.6% of workers voted to reject that contract and then 96% voted to strike. The union is demanding a 40% raise and restoration of the pension.

One Boeing worker, Adam Vogel, called the 25% raise “a load of crap. We haven't had a raise in 16 years.”

Most workers start at a wage of \$19 or \$23 an hour, and in six years can reach the top wage of \$43. The cost of living in Washington State where most Boeing plants are located is 17% higher than the national average and housing costs in Oregon and California are also high.

Striking workers carried hand-made signs that read, “Historic contract my ass” and “Have you seen the damn housing prices?” The song of the hour was, “We’re Not Going to Take It Anymore” by the Twisted Sisters.

Wages are not the only issue. Workers also want their pension plan restored. Ten years ago, Boeing, like most U.S. corporations, terminated the pension plan with a fixed payment and replaced it with a 401(k)-retirement plan based on investments, meaning pension payments can vary depending on investment returns

Boeing is one of the world's two largest aircraft manufacturers, together with Europe's Airbus, each selling about 5,500 planes each year. But for five years Airbus has been selling more planes and Boeing has had a series of disastrous problems over the last several years. Two of the company's 737 Max airliners crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people. In January of this year, a door blew out of a Boeing 737 Max. And most recently the Boeing Starliner space capsule could not be used to return two astronauts from space because its thrusters failed. Boeing has not earned a profit for six years.

While on strike — and this could be a long strike — workers will receive a \$150 per week strike payment, which is not much. Some analysts predict the strike will last until mid-November. A 2008 strike at Boeing lasted for eight weeks and cost the company about \$100 million per day.

Just before the strike, Boeing President Kelly Ortberg, sent a message to workers Wednesday urging them to accept the contract, “For Boeing, it is no secret that our business is in a difficult period, in part due to our own mistakes in the past, I know that we can get back on track, but a strike would put our shared recovery in jeopardy, further eroding trust with our customers and hurting our ability to determine our future together.” The IAM membership was unmoved and overwhelmingly rejected the contract.

Boeing, the IAM, and federal mediators have returned to negotiations.

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The U.S. government has a big interest in the strike, economically, since Boeing is such a large and important business, but also for other reasons. Boeing produces fighters, bombers, and helicopters for the U.S. military and it works with the military to maintain aircrafts. And Boeing's Defense, Space & Security (BDS) division produces satellites, spacecraft, rockets, and weapons.

To win this strike, the IAM is counting on the solidarity of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), which has 16,000 members working at Boeing in Washington who have pledge not to do striking machinists' work. In the past Teamsters union truck drivers have refused to cross picket lines to make deliveries to Boeing. Boeing workers have plunged into the strike with enthusiasm and are determined to win.

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