

Engineers' strike against Boeing is holding strong

by Marianna Wertz

The strike by more than 19,000 engineers and technical workers against the Boeing Company, the Seattle-based aircraft giant, which began on Feb. 9, is growing stronger by the day. This is the largest white-collar strike against a single company in American history, and the first ever (aside from a one-day walkout) in the union's history. As *EIR* reported last week, its importance lies in the focus of the strikers' demands: that Boeing stop its promotion of "shareholder values"—the disease which has crippled most of American industry in recent decades—and resume its former commitment to producing quality products and ensuring a decent living standard for its highly qualified workforce.

As the accompanying interviews with a Boeing engineering retiree and a spokesman for the union show, Boeing forced the strike in order to break the union, the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA/IFPTE Local 2001, AFL-CIO). Especially since its merger with McDonnell Douglas in 1998-99, Boeing, the nation's leading exporter, has been transformed into a company whose principal concern is "the bottom line."

In a March 4 webcast dialogue with supporters in California and New York, Democratic Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche said that the Boeing strikers are right in taking on an incompetent management. "They say the economy's better. Who says the economy's better? These idiots? *Our economy is worse than it ever was. Most people are suffering. The economy is dying. We've lost our factories, we've lost our farms. We've lost our infrastructure, we're losing our power sources.* We're losing—the airlines are no longer trustworthy. Planes are crashing. The market's next. Management is incompetent. The automobile industry's management is increasingly incompetent, as we have a strike going on in Seattle now. And the people on strike are right: The management is incompetent! And these planes are going to come down, crashing, unless we end that incompetence."

Strikebreaking tactic fails

On March 5, after unilaterally declaring an impasse in the strike, Boeing notified the strikers that it would impose its latest contract offer, which was so far from acceptable to the union leadership that they refused even to present it to their members. SPEEA branded Boeing's move as a desperate attempt to get employees to cross the picket line, and predicted

that it wouldn't work. It didn't. Not only did no additional workers cross the picket line, but more employees joined the strike, according to SPEEA Executive Director Charles Bofferding. SPEEA has also filed an unfair labor practices complaint against Boeing with the National Labor Relations Board, stating that the company has repeatedly refused to negotiate in good faith.

On March 7, SPEEA called a mass meeting for strikers, which was addressed by AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka. The AFL-CIO nationally is pouring support into this strike, with President John Sweeney on the picket line on Feb. 19. Trumka presented SPEEA, which has no strike fund, with a \$50,000 check and a pledge of \$25,000 per week for as long as the strike continues.

Trumka told the 3,500 striking engineers and technical workers that Boeing's leadership is "out of touch," and that the firm would become an empty shell without the engineers and technical workers. "You are the future of the labor movement," Trumka told the crowd. "This is a strike about whether employees will be treated like property or like partners."

Bofferding underscored that the strike is not just about a new contract, or the union's demand for better wage and benefit levels than Boeing is offering. "This strike is not just about what's in that contract," Bofferding said. "This strike is about what's happening to the Boeing Company. We're not going to let them tear down this company. We're going to stand up for what is right. We're going to save this company."

The strike is beginning to have a serious impact on the aircraft giant, which, as Allan Rathbun explains (see accompanying interview), can't easily replace its highly skilled workers. Not only has Boeing claimed only one aircraft delivery since the strike began, but on March 3, four engineers assigned to the upcoming launch of a \$1 billion defense satellite walked off the job and joined striking co-workers (SPEEA represents Boeing workers in Washington state, Oregon, California, Arizona, and Florida) on the picket line in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

The Titan workers said they walked because the Boeing Company is pressing them to fill in for striking workers in jobs they do not feel qualified to perform. The Nuclear Launch Detection Satellite was scheduled to launch by a Titan rocket on April 9, but now 100% of the electrical engineers assigned to Cape Canaveral by Boeing are on strike.

The strike has also shut down Boeing's civil- and military-related flight test activities at Seattle's downtown airport.

SPEEA's Webpage sports the banner, "One Day Longer than Management." If the United States is going to return to a capital-intensive, high-technology, production-based economy, which is vital for the future of all Americans, a victory by these workers will be an important step in that process.

Interview: Allan Rathbun

Boeing: 'management plan du jour'

Allan Rathbun, who retired from the Boeing Company in 1995, after 22 years as a software and design engineer, is a member of the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), which has been on strike against Boeing. In this Feb. 27 interview with Marianna Wertz, he provides valuable insight into the problems at Boeing, particularly following its 1998-99 merger with McDonnell Douglas, which caused the strike.

EIR: What is your view of what's going on in the SPEEA strike?

Rathbun: When the merger of McDonnell Douglas and Boeing initially occurred, the story was that the people in Kansas City [McDonnell Douglas headquarters] were very happy. They said, "We're going to get all the goodies that the Boeing people get, now that we're part of Boeing." Well, it went the other way.

You have to consider who the president of the company is, Mr. Stonecipher, who came from McDonnell Douglas. I understand that a large percentage of the people that he brought with him are in the finance and comptroller part of the company. They have a different attitude in general toward engineering. I have some direct experience with them, because I worked with them on a project even before I went to Boeing.

McDonnell Douglas typically did not retain a large engineering staff, from project to project. If they had a new project come along, they'd go out and hire 5,000 contractors, give them 18 months, and pay them big salaries, and then, after that, they're gone, they're history. So, they had a different philosophy.

Boeing traditionally has always maintained a fairly high level of engineering talent. They do have surges. I was on the 777 project, when I retired. We had over 7,000 engineers

working on that one project. Toward the end, of course, a lot of those people were surplus. Many of them found employment in other areas of the company.

Altogether, across the company, about 6,000 of us took an accelerated retirement process, which cut their payroll a lot, because they had a lot of people at the upper end of it, the ones who were making \$70,000-plus.

So, a lot of talent went out. In fact, it was estimated, in the Everett [Washington] division alone, something like 70,000 man-years of experience went out the gate in 1995. In fact, in whole divisions, whole talent pools, in particular disciplines, there was no one left.

One of the other factors going on is they have a demographic problem there now. The middle management has disappeared. The class of engineers and managers in the 40-50 years of age, with 15 years experience, is very thin. They have a lot of old-timers, and they have new people with less than ten years.

This is a good time, if you think about it, to cut your costs. You don't have the people in the middle that are going to know where things are, and what a good contract looks like. They'll be able to intimidate the younger people. The older people are saying, "To heck with it, if they push me too much, I'm going to retire."

EIR: Do you think they forced the strike for this reason?

Rathbun: I think so. I think it's strictly on the basis of the fact that they just figured that they can destroy the union and impose a contract that they want. I think they misjudged it, because there's a lot of support for it, over 64%. Plus, once the contracts were voted down, SPEEA, which had a bare majority of the workforce, has increased their rolls dramatically, to 75% of the work unit, because people could see where it was headed.

In fact, Boeing is being unreasonable, because the way in which the contract was presented — they basically said, "Here it is, take it or leave it." Well, they left it. So, they came back and diddled with it a little bit and said, "Here's your second shot." Well, that went down to defeat, too.

EIR: The press is saying now that this strike could become very lengthy.

Rathbun: They had negotiations yesterday [Feb. 26] and basically, they didn't go anywhere. They cut them off. Where it's going to hurt the company is that airplanes require a lot of inspections. The FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] doesn't have anywhere near the staff to do the work. So, they have to have Designated Engineering Representatives (called DERs). These are people who work for the Boeing Company and are actually approved by the FAA. What I was doing before I retired was nominating these candidates and presenting them to the FAA.

The problem they have, is that it's a two-year process. No matter who you are, it's a two-year process before the FAA