

Boeing workers are striking for everyone's right to retire

written by Stephen Millies
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Boeing Machinists on picket line Sept. 13 in Everett, Wash.

The 33,000 Boeing workers on strike since Sept. 13 are fighting a corporate giant with nearly \$78 billion in sales last year. While strikers are concentrated in the Seattle metropolitan area, workers are also picketing in Portland, Ore., and Southern California.

Ninety-four percent of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) members voted to reject Boeing's meager wage offer that would barely keep up with inflation.

They also want their [pensions](#) back, which were stolen from them a decade ago. Instead of being guaranteed a fixed amount of money every month when they retire, Boeing workers had 401(k) plans foisted on them.

These schemes guarantee nothing. With them, workers' retirement income is subject to the casino capitalism of the stock market.

Boeing [CEO Robert Kelly Ortberg](#) doesn't have to worry about his retirement. He's raking in \$22 million this year.

While workers struggle to afford housing, Ortberg just bought a \$4.1 million house. Ortberg's predecessor as Boeing's CEO, Dave Calhoun, collected \$32.7 million last year.

Instead of bargaining in good faith, [Ortberg has flown](#) in 400 janitors from Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas who are doing the work of IAM members.

Meanwhile, Boeing is forcing non-union employees to take an unpaid week off every month during the strike. The company's proposal to its aerospace engineers to take voluntary layoffs sank like a lead balloon. It was [turned down unanimously](#) by the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace executive board.

Boeing has constantly been the largest U.S. exporter and is an important part of Wall Street's empire. Its B-17 planes dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and its B-52s continue to threaten the world with their nuclear payloads.

Capitalist greed and mass murder

Boeing's greed led to the death of 346 people in crashes of its 737 Max aircraft in Ethiopia and Indonesia. According to a 2020 congressional report, Boeing's rush to sell the plane ignored design flaws and other safety concerns. Former Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg was aided in a coverup by the heads of the Federal Aviation Administration.

"Boeing — under pressure to compete with Airbus and deliver profits for Wall Street — escaped scrutiny from the FAA, withheld critical information from pilots and ultimately put planes into service that killed 346 innocent people," said the former House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee chairperson [Peter DeFazio](#). "What's particularly infuriating is how Boeing and [the] FAA both gambled with public safety in the critical time period between the two crashes."

Capitalist competition led to corporate murder. Boeing's archrival Airbus had announced plans in 2010 to bring out a new plane — the 320 Neo — that would be more fuel efficient. Airlines' profits are tied to fuel prices.

Boeing executives were confronted with the prospect of American Airlines placing a big order with Airbus. So, they canceled plans to build a brand-new aircraft that would have taken a decade to complete.

Boeing instead launched a [frenzied program](#) in 2011 to bring out an updated version of its 737 model that first flew in 1967. Bigger, less fuel-hungry engines would be attached to its wings.

The problem was that the larger engines would have scraped the ground if they

were put below the wings. Boeing's solution was to place the jet engines higher and more forward on the aircraft.

This remedy changed the plane's aerodynamics, making it liable to stall in flight and then crash. Boeing created a defective software program called the [Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System](#) that was supposed to address this danger.

Muilenburg was forced to walk the plank but still collected a \$62.2 million bonus. That's \$179,000 for each of the 346 passengers killed in the 737 Max crashes.

Boeing's troubles with the 737 have continued. On Jan. 5, [a panel flew off a Max 9](#) in flight, leaving a big hole in the airliner. Fortunately, no one was killed on the Alaska Airlines plane.

[NASA astronauts](#) Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore are currently stranded in space because Boeing's Starliner was unable to bring them home from the International Space Station.

Give us back our pensions!

None of these tragedies and fiascos are the fault of Boeing workers. Management's crimes include taking away the IAM members' defined benefit pensions.

An important part of the anti-labor offensive since the 1970s has been eliminating these pensions. These company plans, like Social Security, promise a guaranteed monthly payment depending upon your wages and years of employment.

Corporations have ditched these pension plans because it forces them to pay the promised benefits. From 1962 to 2010, the percentage of employees with defined benefit-only pensions [fell from 44% to 20%](#) of the workforce.

Shedding these pensions allowed corporations to make billions more in profit. The 401(k) plans are a poor substitute.

Boeing workers only agreed to the theft of their pensions because the corporation threatened to move more work to a non-union plant in South Carolina. Now they're fighting to get them back.

Last year's strike by the United Auto Workers against the Big Three auto companies got rid of the hated pay tiers where younger workers got lower pay and benefits. It led to the UAW winning a union representation election at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Any victory by the IAM members at Boeing, particularly in getting back their pensions, can help get a union for the Boeing workers in South Carolina.

It will also echo throughout the United States. Millions of workers have no retirement plan at all. Billionaires want you to work until you drop.

A victory for the IAM members on strike at Boeing will be a victory for all working and poor people.

