

Unions in 7 countries meet in Portland to seek unity in bargaining with Boeing

Now that Boeing is outsourcing work on its new 787 "Dreamliner" to a worldwide web of suppliers, unions representing its workers are gearing up to go global as well.

On March 26-27, union officials from seven countries met in Portland to form a global alliance of Boeing workers. Over a two-day span, union leaders from Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden and the United States shared information and talked about ways to work more closely together.

The global aerospace industry may be doing well, but aerospace workers have faced difficult times, said Thomas Buffenbarger, general president of the U.S.-based International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

"We must make certain Boeing can never pit us against each other when it comes to determining where production will take place," Buffenbarger told attendees.

The meeting was organized by the Geneva, Switzerland-based International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), and was scheduled in Portland just prior to an annual conference of the IAM's Aerospace Division. Boeing, the world's largest aircraft manufacturer, has 150,000 employees in 70 countries, though most of the work is done by workers in developed countries.

Unions have never successfully merged across national borders, IMF General Secretary Marcello Malentacchi told the NW Labor Press. But there are other ways to cooperate besides one



Listening to a delegate via simultaneous translation, Robert Steiert (left), Thomas Buffenbarger (center) and Marcello Malentacchi preside over a conference of Boeing unions put on in Portland March 26-27 by the International Metalworkers Federation. Steiert, from Germany, heads the IMF's Aerospace Department; Buffenbarger is general president of the U.S.-based Machinists Union; Malentacchi, from Italy, is IMF general secretary.

big worldwide union, Malentacchi said. They can coordinate their demands, synchronize the expiration of their contracts, and sit in on each others' negotiations with the company.

However, it was clear from several hours of country reports that the assembled unions face widely different circumstances. The company appears to have a different labor relations posture for each country, depending on local laws and customs.

While European unions benefit from labor-friendly legal protections and national health systems, Boeing's U.S. unions have had five strikes in the last two years trying to defend health insurance coverage.

Australian unions are fighting for their lives after a complete rewrite of the nation's labor laws by anti-union Prime Minister John Howard. It took an eight-month strike for one group of four dozen Boeing workers in New South Wales just to win union recognition.

In Japan, unions are fighting the spread of lower-paid part-time jobs.

In Germany, unions are focusing on more flexible rules to help weather downturns. In slow times, German aerospace employees will work four days a week as an alternative to layoffs.

In Italy, unions bargained a contract that gives wage increases each time profits rise a certain amount.

"It will be a sunny day for labor when the Boeing Company and its suppliers receive similar proposals from aerospace workers in different countries," Buffenbarger told delegates. "Then and only then will companies understand that they can no longer keep us divided by oceans, languages, customs, and industrial relations systems."

AFL-CIO Exec Council calls for U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq

LAS VEGAS — It is time for the United States to bring its military involvement in what has become a "civil war" in Iraq to an end, the AFL-CIO Executive Council said in a strongly worded statement approved March 7 at its winter meeting here.

Blasting Bush's conduct of the war, the statement declares that "we should not be asking our young men and women who serve this nation in its armed forces to remain in Iraq on extended tours without proper armor and equipment, caught in an endless occupation in the midst of a civil war."

Many of the troops and those killed are sons, daughters, sisters, brothers and husbands and wives of workers, the statement adds. "The best way now to recognize and honor their service is to take them out of harm's way," it says.

The statement is an outgrowth of the AFL-CIO's historic decision at its 2005 convention in Chicago to break for the first time ever with the government on a war-and-peace issue. The federation called then for "rapid withdrawal" of troops from Iraq. This statement was along the same lines.



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