

USA: 'It's because we were union members': Boeing fires workers who organized

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Workers terminated by the aircraft maker in South Carolina see their dismissals as part of efforts to stifle a nascent union.

Richard Mester worked for Boeing in [South Carolina](#) as a flight safety inspector for five years before being suddenly fired – along with two other employees – in November 2018 for allegedly failing to report a bird strike. However, the bad news also came shortly after the company was told Mester had been elected a union steward.

“I have 30 years’ experience as an engine guy, so I was taken back by it because I don’t miss bird strikes,” Mester told the Guardian.

An air force veteran, Mester had just bought a house and had two daughters in college when he was terminated. Mester and his colleagues have filed unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging there was no bird strike at all, but rather that this is an excuse to fire workers involved in unionization efforts.

“It was easy to see it was because we were union members,” said Mester. “Boeing has no qualms about squashing any possibility of a union down here. Unfortunately we were the result of that.”

Mester and his colleagues believe their plight is intrinsically linked to Boeing’s attempts to stifle unionization of the workforce in its important South Carolina operations – a workplace that has become an important battleground for both America’s labor movement and the aircraft giant.

Boeing’s mere presence in South Carolina was already [viewed](#) as a union-busting move when the company first opened an aircraft production plant there in 2011 rather than Washington state, where Boeing had unionized operations. South Carolina has the lowest union membership rate in the United States at just [2.7%](#) of workers. The National Labor Relations Board filed a federal complaint against Boeing for the move, accusing the company of violating federal labor law, before dropping it after the company came to an agreement with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers(IAM).

Since then, Boeing has fought to prevent unionization efforts of their workers in South Carolina. In February 2017, union organizers came up short in attempting to [unionize](#) about 3,000 Boeing workers. But organizers found success in May 2018, when [over 60%](#) of the nearly 200 Boeing flight line workers in North Charleston, South Carolina, voted to form a union, despite an aggressive anti-union campaign led by Boeing which [included](#) radio ad buys and attempts to delay and stop the election from occurring.

[Boeing](#) is formally appealing against the election results with the National Labor Relations Board.

“This is where the problems come in with US labor law. Boeing has a zillion options available to it,”

said Lee Adler, a professor at Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. “All these things get a chance to get litigated and it slows down the process. While the process slows down, what happens at the plant site is they start firing people knowing in a year or two they might have to pay them some wages for firing due to union activity, but it scares people and scares them enough to think maybe they did the wrong thing to vote for the union.”

As the board [reviews](#) the appeals, the union has accused Boeing of firing workers for supporting the union and [spying](#) on workers who voted in the election.

“It’s been 11 long months since the election,” said Vinny Addeo, IAM organizing director. “They are imposing their power, strength and political allies to delay this proceeding as long as possible because they know doing this disenfranchises these workers and tries to break up any type of momentum we have going forward.”

The union’s associate general counsel, Bill Haller, added: “They want to send the message that if you support the union you’re going to get fired. They’re not being subtle about it.”

The union noted other groups of Boeing workers in South Carolina are waiting on the NLRB decision before proceeding with their own unionization efforts.

“They started writing people up for things that were the norm. They’ve targeted union supporters,” said a current Boeing employee who requested to remain anonymous due to fear of retaliation. The worker explained that after the union vote Boeing increased the workload of the group of workers who voted to form a union, reduced quality control and frequently sends the workers job openings in different locations.

“I personally don’t believe Boeing knows how to treat hourly workers without a contract. We need some type of an agreement. They don’t even follow their own policies and procedures that are in writing,” added the worker in regards to why a union is needed.

As the NLRB reviews the unfair labor practice charges filed against Boeing , those fired workers who supported the union are left to struggle with unemployment.

Sixty-one-year-old Carlos Lugo, one of the two other union-supporting Boeing workers fired alongside Mester, is still looking for employment. He says he has been forced to sell some of his belongings to try to make ends meet.

“Boeing never gave us the opportunity to write a statement on what we think happened with the airplane. They’re accusing us of being irresponsible of a bird strike that they can’t prove,” said Lugo, who worked at Boeing for 10 years before his termination. “It’s been very abusive what they’ve done to us.”

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