

Workers Reject Union at Boeing's South Carolina Facilities

By Sarah Maneval, J.D. Candidate 2019 | March 7, 2017

On February 15, despite efforts from the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), seventy-four percent of approximately 3,000 eligible employees voted to reject unionization of Boeing's Dreamliner assembly line in North Charleston, South Carolina.

Given that the North Charleston plant was [founded after a strike in Washington in 2008](#), Boeing has been criticized for opening the plant as a means of evading unions and increasing its bargaining power with the 30,000 unionized employees at its Puget Sound plant in Washington State. Unlike Washington, which has a high union presence, South Carolina is a "right to work" state, which prevents unionized workplaces from compelling new employees to join the union. In fact, South Carolina has the [lowest percentage of employees represented by unions in the United States](#).

Unions can call a vote once they receive support from thirty percent of eligible workers. Yet, in order to maximize success, such organizations tend to delay this process until there is greater support. Boeing officials suggest that the vote was held earlier to ensure it would precede President Trump's appointments to the [National Labor Relations Board](#), which oversees union elections. IAM denies the strategic timing, and notes they called for a vote in 2015, but canceled it due to ["an atmosphere of threats, harassment and unprecedented political interference."](#)

Prior to the vote, Boeing contested the benefit of unions, claiming that such organizations are divisive, make false promises and cause tension with management that lead to strikes. Pro-union organizers cite an average of [\\$7 dollars an hour in higher wages](#) for unionized workers in Washington than their counterparts in South Carolina. On the other hand, Boeing attributes this wage differential to differences in the cost of living. In addition to requesting higher wages, employees criticized Boeing for their unfair approach to evaluations, promotions and raises, as well as inconsistent direction from management. Yet, despite these complaints, a group tied to the South Carolina Manufacturers Alliance ran opposition ads. Ultimately, Boeing led a successful campaign to deter workers from joining.

The Boeing vote is one in a series of losses for unions in the South. Employees at Volkswagen in Tennessee and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco in North Carolina narrowly rejected unions in 2014 and 2011, respectively. Some [Southern politicians claim these votes as a victory](#), as they are trying to entice manufacturing jobs to come to the South based on promises to keep unions out. While not all Southern states are experiencing decreases in unions (Florida, Virginia and Mississippi have had gains), high profile votes rejecting collective action as well as new Trump policies will likely continue challenging union organizers.

Conversely, this vote is a boost for Boeing, especially in the wake of President Trump's visit to the company. During the presidential campaign, Trump criticized Boeing for the high costs associated with making the presidential airplane, Air Force One. Furthermore, this will be the first visit since President Trump appointed a Department of Labor secretary.