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# Strikes are rare, but area economic strength leaves employers open to work stoppages

Wichita Business Journal - by [Kelly L. Anderson](#)

Prolonged strikes, once a common way for workers to show unhappiness with contract terms, are losing momentum as more companies struggle with declining budgets, sales and production, analysts say.

But two aviation-related strikes in the last month in Wichita are an indicators of the strength of the local industry, says Dick Conway, of Seattle-based **Dick Conway & Associates**.

“Because Boeing is strong, labor feels like they aren’t getting a fair share,” says Conway, an economist. “They see a five-year backlog and think they can flex a little muscle.”

The recent **Hawker Beechcraft Corp.** machinists’ strike in Wichita that lasted about a month and the ongoing strike against the **Boeing Co.**, in Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Wichita, are examples that workers are buoyed by companies that are bucking the national trend by doing well financially in a tight economy.

“In this day and age, strikes are really uncommon because manufacturing is a dying sector,” says Conway. “The automotive industry is an example of that.”

Bob Wood, a spokesman for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, which represents the more than 5,000 machinists who held a strike at Hawker Beechcraft, agrees that the strength of the company helped workers to vote overwhelmingly for a strike even though it might hurt the worker financially.

“There’s a time when you have to strike even though it’s not a good time,” Wood says. “We had a situation where the company was coming to us as if they were in bankruptcy, as if they were really hurting, and demanded all of these concessions. But they couldn’t handle a long strike because they had orders to fill.”

### Strike Stats

Conway points to statistics from the **U.S. Department of Labor**, which show strikes involving 1,000 or more workers have steadily declined since the department began keeping



KELLY L. ANDERSON / WBJ

Boeing strikers Regina Johnson, James Kannady and Denise Porter walk the picket line outside Boeing IDS.

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statistics in 1947. The numbers show how employees have less footage in down economic times when it comes to striking, he says.

In 1979, there were 235 strikes. In 2007, there were 21 strikes involving 1,000 or more workers, according to the labor department.

The average length of strikes from 1997 to 2007 was about 20 days.

Representatives at Boeing declined to comment on the reasons employees may strike.

“We need to negotiate a contract that is in the best interest of our employees, the best interest of our customers and the best interest of our business, and that’s what we are trying to do,” says Jarrod Bartlett, a Boeing IDS spokesman.

No talks are scheduled, he says.

“We need to understand the IAM’s critical few issues so we can determine if there is a path forward,” Bartlett says. “We have been talking for many weeks, and we understand the key issues for employees. But we need to understand their priorities before we can make progress at the table.”

Hawker Beechcraft officials declined to comment on their strike.

### **Strong Industry**

Patrick Anderson, principal and CEO of Michigan-based **Anderson Economic Group**, says aviation companies seldom lose ground during short work stoppages.

“In commercial aviation, most of those airlines can wait for the product,” he says.

Martin Perline, a professor of economics at **Wichita State University** who specializes in labor issues, agrees that Wichita aviation manufacturing is in a unique situation compared to the struggling automotive and newspaper industries.

“To quote an old cliché, you can’t squeeze water out of a turnip,” he says. “There’s not going to be a strike at GM because they are on the brink as it is. You go after somebody who needs you — (someone) who’s successful.”

Anderson agrees, saying that in terms of bargaining power, “it’s hard to ask for above-market wages from an employer that’s facing a weaker market.”

But even healthy industries such as aviation are not immune to the rising cost of doing business. The cost of materials has soared this year, Anderson says.

Perline says even in a strong economy strikers may not be able to go without a paycheck, but they’ll find another job in the meantime and wait for a payoff in settling the labor dispute.

“If you’re going to strike, you want a payoff,” he says.

And, Perline says, most of the time higher pay is not the biggest issue, adding that job security

appears to be the major concern with most workers.

For the Hawker Beechcraft striker, health care was one of the major issues, along with pensions, higher pay and outsourcing, Wood says.

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