

Rejecting contract offer, union begins coast-to-coast strike of United Launch Alliance

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NASA's InSight mission, which will study the interior of Mars, launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California on an Atlas V rocket at 7:05 a.m. Eastern time on Saturday, May 5, 2018. Florida Today



(Photo: NASA/Bill Ingalls)

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Hundreds of union members rejected a three-year contract offer from aerospace company United Launch Alliance on Sunday, initiating a strike that will include non-stop pickets from Florida to California.

About 600 members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers union declined the launch provider's offer and will begin picketing Monday near three of the company's major centers: Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Florida; Decatur, Alabama; and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. The union's members are largely responsible for the hands-on, hardware-related work performed at the three locations, which includes initial rocket assembly in Decatur and final assembly and launch at the two military installations.

"The men and women of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers are going on strike tomorrow because the workers have lost job security," said Kevin DiMeco, a local organizer for the union. "It's a sad day for our membership and for ULA."

The union has about 300 members in Decatur, 220 to 230 in Cape Canaveral and 70 to 80 at Vandenberg.

A major point of contention, the union said, were changes made to the contracts that offered employees less general flexibility, most notably when it comes to travel. Teams often travel between Vandenberg and the Cape to support missions, such as

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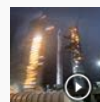
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"A big part of it is how they have people travel from different locations to launch," said Jody Bennett, chief of staff and aerospace negotiator for the union. "It doesn't give them a lot of family time. They can force you to pack up, leave and go someplace for 30 days."

"A month away from home is a long time, especially if it's forced on you," Bennett said, noting that travel beyond 30 days is voluntary.

When reached for comment on Sunday, ULA said its offer was fair and competitive.

"We're disappointed that the IAM members rejected ULA's last, best and final offer and voted to strike," said Tory Bruno, ULA's president and CEO. "We believe our proposed contract is very competitive with other companies. Importantly, ULA's final offer contributes to ULA's long term viability in an increasingly competitive launch business environment."

The company's "[Last, Best and Final Offer](#)" included, among other things: A \$6,000 bonus per employee if the contract had been approved before May 7; wage increases of 1.5 percent, 1.75 percent and 2 percent for three years; maintenance of existing medical plans; a guarantee that ULA will not displace any additional employees due to subcontracting; and an increase in the cost of living adjustment from \$850 to \$1,200 per year, to name a few.

ULA said its operations will remain open at all sites and that the company will "implement its strike contingency plans while focusing on commitments to our customers."

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DiMeco and Bennett both stressed that the economics of the deal, or pay and benefits, were not the main concerns expressed by members. They said ULA could have offered more in the way of protections from rising health care costs, but the lack of flexibility was the tipping point.

"With the increase in insurance premiums over the last several years, we can anticipate that it's going to take a lot of their income at the end of this contract just to pay for insurance," Bennett said of the members.

ULA's launch manifest, meanwhile, doesn't appear to be at imminent risk: The company has been contracted by NASA to launch the high-profile Parker Solar Probe no earlier than July 31 on a Delta IV Heavy from Cape Canaveral. That mission will approach within 4 million miles of the sun to help forecast major space weather events and their impacts to Earth.

"The last thing we want to see is anything getting delayed," DiMeco said. "Hopefully ULA comes back to the table quickly so we can resolve this and get on down the road like we have been for years. The last thing we want to do is put a black mark on the space industry."

ULA, a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin, builds and launches rockets from its Atlas V, Delta IV, and Delta IV Heavy families. The older model Delta II will see its final launch this year.

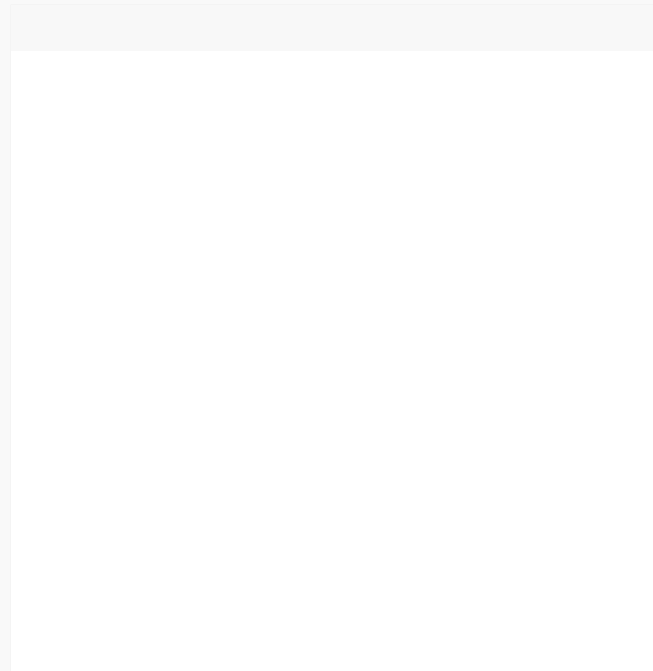
The next steps, according to the union, are up to ULA – Bennett said they are willing to

meet with the company anytime and anywhere to discuss the contract. In the meantime, members will kick off local picketing at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station's south gate, on Garden Street in Titusville, and at the intersection of State Road 3 and U.S. 1 in Oak Hill.

"A few little changes and this could be a win-win for everybody," DiMeco said.

Contact Emre Kelly at ekelly@floridatoday.com or 321-242-3715. Follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) at [@EmreKelly](#).

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