

Washington state carpenters continue strike as union prepares fifth sellout contract

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As Washington state carpenters begin their third week on strike, the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) has initiated a fifth round of contract negotiations aimed at producing another sellout agreement and shutting down the strike as quickly as possible.

In preparation, the NWCU noted on its latest bargaining update that the strike will be “suspended” not if the latest agreement is accepted by the membership, but when it is “sent to members for ratification.” This could be as early as next week as the union continues bargaining Associated General Contractors (AGC) consortium.

Carpenters went on strike on September 16, their first strike since 2003, only after the NWCU and its parent union the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) tried to push through four separate pro-company tentative agreements, all of which would have continued to erode carpenters’ living standards amid skyrocketed costs in Seattle and the surrounding area. Moreover, the NWCU only called out 2,000 of its 12,000 members on strike, citing no-strike clauses signed in various agreements with the AGC and state and local Democratic Party politicians.

The determination of the union to impose another pro-management deal has run up against a determined wall of opposition on the part of workers. There have been constant calls by workers on social media for the union to expand the strike, by both increasing the number of pickets and the number of locations on strike. A number of pickets have been organized independently of the union for precisely these reasons and have met with some success. Carpenters report that at many of the sites where they have set up wildcat pickets, other workers at those sites, both carpenters and other trades workers, have also walked off in solidarity.

At the same time, however, rank-and-file initiated efforts to expand the strike have been called “unauthorized” by the union and attempts have been made by the bureaucracy to shut them down and victimize the workers involved.

The anger felt by workers toward the NWCU for its conduct during the strike intensified Thursday when it emerged that the best offer put forward by the union was for a wage increase of \$14.75 per hour over three years, countered by the AGC with an offer of a mere \$9.81 per hour over three years.

Many workers were outraged at the company proposal. A common sentiment on the Peter J. McGuire Facebook page, which has been a rallying point for many of the more militant members of the rank-and-file, was, “Sheeesh biggest f**k you in the world.” Another noted, “Looks like it’s time to start striking [Project Labor Agreements] and no strike clauses,” a reference to the many works projects where the NWCU has ordered workers to remain on the job.

Other carpenters directed their disgust at the union. Melina Harris sardonically noted, “They [the AGC] were obviously impressed with hundreds of workers picketing an empty hole, a storage yard, an almost completed job.... Those actions were a seriously bad FU to the membership. Not ok, not respectful, not reality. That Sucked.” Others demanded to know why the union began with an offer below the \$15 per hour increase over three years that many workers see as the absolute minimum raise needed.

One striker, Chris, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, remarked on how little information has come from the union itself. “I’m frustrated that I haven’t heard this information from my council. It could be hearsay, it could be true. I don’t know what to believe. There has been no official statement other than they are

returning to [the] table on Tuesday.”

He continued, “It’s 40 cents more than TA3, which is horrible. I heard the same on Facebook ... I hope it’s false, but the fact that I don’t know seems absurd. It’s almost as if they want us to panic and let our imaginations run. ... I firmly believe that my council are a bunch of Union Busters. I understand the last strike in Portland, OR for the carpenters ended in a decrease in pay due to a lawsuit because of some violence. If the AGC really is in league with our council maybe that’s the situation they are trying to create. Shapiro said early on that if we went on strike, we would lose money. I know I sound like a conspiracy theorist, and I hope I’m far-fetched, but they sure haven’t been on our side.”

A further Facebook post exposed the fact that the union leadership, headed by Evelyn Shapiro, who makes \$259,038 from just her NWCUC position, has willfully kept workers in the dark about the negotiations. “In the Local 30 contract negotiations zoom meeting, a bargaining committee member just verified that through the entire bargaining process, they in fact could have been telling us everything going on about the negotiations, but instead they have been instructed not to by the Chair, Evelyn Shapiro and the Co-Chair, Jeff Thorson, until today when they were given permission to speak about it. So we have been kept in the dark on purpose throughout this entire process!!”

The NWCUC has also demanded that the 10,000 workers they have kept off the picket lines pay a “Strike Assessment.” In a letter sent to its members on September 24, the union demanded that workers pay “an amount not less than two hours’ pay for each day worked during the strike for the purpose of establishing a strike and defense fund.” In the letter, the union makes clear that these funds will either be collected via check voluntarily or via a bill to workers sometime in October.

The growing rebellion by carpenters against the NWCUC is a reflection of a broader movement by workers to organize themselves independently of the trade unions, which have been transformed into corporate labor police and appendages of the Democratic Party working to isolate and suppress struggles. This is true for carpenters, as well as auto workers, teachers, nurses and all sections of the working class.

As the WSWS has warned since the beginning of the strike, the union will not respond to rank and file pressure by waging a more militant fight. In fact the NWCUC has only become more determined to isolate and end the struggle. For workers to carry their fight forward, the strike must be taken into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of the NWCUC, to prepare for joint action with other sections of workers, including Washington state educators, Amazon, Microsoft and Boeing workers, and broader sections of workers nationally and internationally.



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