

Seattle-area crane operators strike following rejection of sellout deal

Our reporter
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Seattle-area construction crane and heavy equipment operators, surveyors, stationary engineers, concrete pumpers, material hoisters, and lay pavers struck the Associated General Contractors (AGC) on Tuesday after rejecting a tentative agreement between International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 302 and management by a vote of 64 to 36 percent.

Earlier this month, the construction workers rejected the AGC offer of a 15.9 percent hike for three years along with a 13 percent rise in medical and pension benefits. The rejection of the offer followed the spurning of a previous offer in July by a tally of 67 to 33 percent. Management's offer was a pay hike of only 14.9 percent and a 9.2 percent increase for benefits. The striking workers currently have an hourly base pay range of only \$37.70 to \$43.13.

The strike is impacting all members of Local 302 in western Washington state working under the Washington Master Labor Agreement. The walkout by crane operators will stall many construction projects, since the hoisting of materials is critical to many aspects of the building process.

The last contract expired in June and provided for a 6 percent pay increase spread over four years. The workers are covered under a project labor agreement with the AGC. Project labor agreements that cover all workers on a project are favored by some employers because they guarantee a steady supply of labor and are protected by no-strike clauses.

The Seattle area has been in a construction boom with the development of Amazon, Google, Facebook, and other high-tech and biotech enterprises. Seattle proper for the last three years has held the record for the highest number of cranes in operation. Before the work stoppage, there were 65 cranes operating in Seattle, the

most for any city in the US, while 14 were running in nearby Bellevue. The biggest project underway is Amazon-leased Rainier Square Tower, which will be Seattle's second-tallest building.

The two contract offer rejections reveal the pent-up frustrations over wage levels in an area of the US that has one of the highest costs-of-living along with soaring home prices. The month of May marked the 21st consecutive month in which the Seattle area has led the rest of the country in the increase of home prices.

The typical price of a house in Seattle is now \$813,000, while the price in Bellevue is \$978,000. The three-year Washington Master Labor Agreement, which expired in June of this year, offered a miserly pay increase of only 6 percent. What is also revealed is the awareness on the part of every construction worker that they risk life and limb daily to put up offices for Amazon whose CEO, Jeff Bezos, is now raking in wealth at \$3,000 a second or apartment high-rises to house those in the top 1 percent of the population.

The contract struggle could very well escalate. Teamster construction drivers rejected an AGC offer on July 7. The IUOE bureaucracy has sought to isolate the strike by allowing work to continue at worksites operating under other labor agreements.

For its part, the AGC expressed confidence that it could rely on the union to betray its members with a statement by the Washington AGC labor relations director, Doug Peterson, declaring, "This union has been a longtime partner with us and we're going to work with them." IUOE Local 302 Business Manager Daren Konopaski added, "We have a longstanding relationship with the AGC and our contractors and we are hopeful a resolution will be reached soon."



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