

Workers forced to stay on the job as heat wave continues to sweep Pacific Northwest

David Fitzgerald
1 July 2021

As a record-breaking heat wave driven by man-made climate change has caused hundreds of deaths across the Pacific Northwest in the US and British Columbia in Canada, workers have been forced to continue working under dangerous conditions.

The heat wave, which began last Friday, has caused the deaths of at least 63 people in Oregon, almost certainly an undercount. Washington state has still not bothered to issue an official statement on the number of deaths caused by the heat wave, despite having the largest number of people exposed to dangerous temperatures. However, the King County coroner's office revealed that at least 20 have died, with 13 having died in the Seattle metropolitan area.

As the recorded number of deaths caused by sustained temperatures of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit continues to increase, the local and national media has paid equal attention to celebrating the full reopening of the economy. This is under conditions where the more infectious Delta variant is causing another global upsurge of infections and deaths as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

The hundreds of deaths caused by the heat wave are the result of systematic neglect of infrastructure and public services. The rise in temperatures was predicted, but nothing was done to prepare.

The region's infrastructure has proven wholly inadequate for the dramatic rise in temperatures. Over 9,300 Avista customers in Spokane, Washington lost power on Monday and more blackouts were implemented on Tuesday and Wednesday. The electrical system could not keep up with demand, thus compounding the danger of those without electricity suffering from hyperthermia.

Workers have had to endure life-threatening working conditions across the Pacific Northwest. Amazon

workers at the enormous Kent warehouse told the *Seattle Times* that the company was "ill-prepared" for the heat wave. Numerous workers walked off the job to escape the heat.

Despite these conditions, the Amazon facility continued to hold productivity competitions. Workers were told to work as fast as possible for one hour at a time. One Kent Amazon worker told the Dailydot that "I was sweating immediately. I'm really surprised at how ill-prepared they are, given we have known it would be this hot for a little bit now." The Kent Amazon facility did nothing more than provide ice scarves to workers.

Workers across industries face similar conditions. Voodoo Doughnut employees in Portland, Oregon, walked out on strike after risking heatstroke for two days on the job. One worker, speaking to the website Eater, illustrated the situation: "In the building, [temperatures] were in the 80s, and working by fryers was absolutely miserable. By the end of the day, I was doubled over with my head in a trash can." Temperatures eventually climbed to 96 degrees in the store.

Voodoo has retaliated against workers by firing many of those who walked out. Management had known that excessive heat had been an issue in past years, but did nothing. The temperature had been a "daily issue," according to one worker.

Cassandra, a worker at a coffee shop in Seattle, spoke to the WSWs about the conditions she has had to face. She explained, "When the forecast for a three- to four-day span of unprecedented heat came in last week, I suggested to the manager and the owner (who lives in San Diego) that we close down for the hottest days since there is no air conditioning. Temperatures were as predicted, 98, 100, 101 and today is expected to be

109-111.

“The kitchen area by the grill was extremely hot when I went in there, possibly 150 degrees. The kitchen staff are not allowed to open the back door. I am not allowed to leave the front window open when I’m not taking orders. We have a couple of small fans, but they just move the hot air around, they don’t cool it down.

“The manager told me last week, ‘I know it sounds unbearable, but everyone will be fine.’ The next day I told the owner that I strongly urge him to close down at least on Monday, predicted to be unbearably bad heat, especially in a hot building with a grill and no air conditioning. I told him to do it for the sake of his kitchen workers. This had not occurred to him. He was reluctant to do it, but finally conceded late in the day yesterday. If I hadn’t pushed it, he would’ve kept the place open.”

Agricultural workers in Oregon, Washington and Idaho have had to continue working in temperatures well over 100 degrees. So far, the death of one farmworker from the heat in St. Paul, Oregon has been reported. In Washington, the United Farm Workers (UFW) begged Democratic governor Jay Inslee to implement “emergency heat standards” in what amounted to a futile gesture. The organization did not threaten any strike action to save workers’ lives. In fact, they have restricted their activities to handing out water.

Chelsea Dimas, a UFW volunteer, expressed the orientation of the UFW as a whole when she told *New York Magazine*, “the UFW, our volunteers, and other organizations fighting for farmworker rights are in no way trying to vilify farmers or property owners. What we’re trying to do is make things right. And we’re more than open to working with them to ensure that these conditions are improved. We’re not trying to attack, we’re trying to help people.” In other words, the UFW is dedicated to preventing a rebellion by farmworkers against their exploitation by farm owners, and ensuring that conditions remain for one of the most exploited sections of the working class. The UFW has been “working with” farmers for half a century in order to stop workers from realizing their political independence.

These are the conditions faced by countless workers across the whole region. However, workers do not face these horrendous conditions because capitalists are

necessarily greedy or bad people. The accumulation of profits is an absolute requirement for the continuation of the capitalist system. A worker’s capacity to work is bought and sold just like any other commodity. Some workers are allowed to suffer or die of hyperthermia for the same reason that fruit is often allowed to rot in a warehouse; because it is more profitable for the capitalist class to do so.

In response, workers must adopt an international socialist program and perspective to struggle for their interests. To do this, it is necessary for workers to politically separate themselves entirely from the capitalist class and its Democratic and Republican representatives, and this entails a decisive break from the pro-corporate trade unions that have been functioning as a labor police force for decades.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact