

After rejecting fourth union-backed contract, thousands of Washington state carpenters strike

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An estimated 2,000 carpenters in Seattle and across the state of Washington began their first strike in nearly two decades Thursday after rejecting the fourth proposed contract agreed to by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC). Rank-and-file carpenters are seeking to expand their strike to other construction sites, where the union has signed no-strike pledges, and bring out the other 10,000 unionized carpenters who are currently being kept on the job.

Over the weekend, carpenters voted by 56-44 percent to reject a four-year contract proposal that included below-inflation rate raises and a further erosion of pension benefits. Because of the skyrocketing cost of living in the Seattle area, construction workers are forced to live long distances from their worksites, sometimes spending three hours to travel back and forth and hundreds of dollars each week on gas and parking costs.

Carpenters are demanding a \$15-an-hour wage increase over three years, while the deal the union reached with the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) is for a \$9.40-an-hour increase over four years. Top paid carpenters currently earn \$46.92 an hour. According to the MIT Living Wage calculator, an adult with three children needs \$58.29 an hour in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area to support a family.

The area, which is home to Amazon, Microsoft, Boeing and other corporate giants, along with some of the world's richest people, is also seeing a spike in construction projects, reaping billions in revenue for the Association of General Contractors of Washington.

"Seattle has been booming since 2010," John McCallum, who voted "no" on the contract, told the *Seattle Times*. "Every time the contract comes up, the same crap is spewed: 'We did the best we could. We'll get you better next time,'" he said of the union leadership. "It's coming to a head, and we need to stand up for ourselves."

Construction workers, who already work in one of the

most dangerous industries, have also been disproportionately hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the state of Washington, construction sites are the sixth highest setting for outbreaks. In Colorado, 111 construction workers have died from COVID-19 so far, more than any other segment of working-age adults.

On the eve of the strike, carpenter union officials warned rank-and-file workers that "wildcats" and "sickouts" or "picketing without the express permission of authorized officials of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters" would be a violation of the union's constitution and the National Labor Relations Act. Any worker the union finds guilty of such a violation, the UBC bureaucrats warned, would be expelled from the union and face the loss of their jobs and potential fines.

The union issued 47 sites where it said it had no-strike agreements with contractors. But rank-and-file pickets went to various sites, including Microsoft office projects, and called out their fellow carpenters and building trades workers. As one worker posted on the Facebook page, "The Microsoft job wouldn't have been shut down today if we followed this advice. This strike can become stronger and stronger, but that won't happen by blindly obeying leaders who have proven time and again to be on the side of the contractors."

The sites with no-strike pledges include locations where the UBC signed so-called Project Labor Agreements. Under a corporatist arrangement involving federal and state authorities, these projects, which receive tax abatements and other government incentives, must employ union workers. In exchange, the UBC agreed to grant the contractors various concessions to cut their labor costs in addition to banning strikes. Rank-and-file workers have denounced these sweetheart deals, saying they are not designed to "save union jobs" but the dues income that fund the bloated incomes of the union bureaucrats.

Leading negotiations for the Pacific Northwest Regional

Council of Carpenters is Evelyn Shapiro-O’Conner, who, as executive secretary-treasurer of the union, pockets \$259,038 a year. This is in addition to at least another \$90,725 for her other positions, including co-chairman of the Carpenters Retirement Plan of Western Washington and trustee of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters. On the picket lines Thursday, angry carpenters confronted Shapiro-O’Conner for trying to push through the sellout agreement and blocking the spread of the strike.

The national leaders of the UBC are no doubt multimillionaires. General President Douglas McCarron takes in \$519,000 a year, Secretary-Treasurer Michael Capelli collects \$490,000, and the top 11 executives average \$383,745 a year, more than six times what a journeyman carpenter brings home and 12 times what an apprentice earns.

The UBC bureaucrats are also notorious for looting the union-run health care and pension funds, investing for person gain in various business ventures, including those built by non-union construction workers, and robbing money from workers’ wages to cover the shortfall.

In 2019, George R. Laufenberg, the former administrative manager of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters New Jersey/New York benefit funds, was indicted for defrauding the funds of more than \$1.5 million. Laufenberg, who pocketed an annual salary of \$300,000, used his authority to grant himself a \$120,000 pension and \$180,000 in annual deferred compensation, without retiring or without giving notice or receiving approval from the funds’ board of trustees.

In 2011, Walter Ralph Mabry, former chairman of the Michigan pension fund’s board, pleaded guilty for taking kickbacks in the form of \$5,000 to \$10,000 in hotel and entertainment reimbursements from an investment consultant and one of the fund’s investment managers.

Carpenters are also angered over the four-year length of the agreement, which would give them a different expiration date from all the other building trades workers. After carpenters voted down the first two union-backed proposals during the last round of contracts in 2018, Pacific Northwest UBC officials falsely claimed Operating Engineers had agreed to the contractors’ terms to block a unified strike. Shortly after they pushed through a deal, which sharply increased out-of-pocket health care costs for carpenters, crane operators walked out on a 17-day strike.

Carpenters are organizing opposition through Facebook, including through a page of dissidents called the Peter J. McGuire Group, named after the 19th century socialist and eight-hour day champion who co-founded the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in 1881.

Organizers of the Facebook group have come under a

vicious red-baiting attack by Shapiro-O’Conner and Nicole Grant, executive secretary-treasurer of the King County Labor Council. Both bureaucrats also railed against Seattle Councilwoman and Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant, with Grant denouncing “Marxist extremists, with the backing of an elected official” for wreaking “havoc” inside the union.

While calling for open negotiations and a reduction in the salaries of the corrupt union leaders, the perspective of the Peter J. McGuire Group is little more than the reform of the union. There is a long history of such failed attempts, from the Miners for Democracy, New Directions in the UAW and Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which ended with the incorporation of these dissidents into the union bureaucracy.

The transformation of the UBC and other unions into tools of corporate management and the government is not due solely to the corruption of the union bureaucrats. The roots of the degeneration of the unions, which is an international phenomenon, lie in their defense of the capitalist system and virulent anti-socialism, their outmoded nationalist outlook and longtime political subordination of the working class to the two big business parties.

There is a rising wave of working-class struggles, from the Dana auto parts workers to nurses and Nabisco workers, and educators and parents fighting the criminal reopening of the schools as COVID-19 cases rise. We urge construction workers to join the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees in order to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the corporatist unions and mobilize the full strength of the working class to defend lives and living standards.



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