Washington state carpenters enter third day of strike, defying union in fight for higher wages

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On Monday, over 2,000 carpenters entered the third day of their walkout in Seattle and across the state of Washington, fighting for wage increases to keep up with soaring living costs and to defend their healthcare and pension benefits. The first strike by Washington state carpenters in nearly two decades started last Thursday after workers rejected the fourth tentative agreement pushed by the Northwest Carpenters Union (NWUC) on behalf of the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC).

Rank-and-file carpenters are carrying forward their struggle in defiance of the NWUC leaders who have done everything in their power to prevent and now sabotage the strike. The union is ordering 10,000 of its 12,000 members to stay on the job at the Climate Pledge Arena, Sound Transit light rail and dozens of other construction sites where the NWUC signed sweetheart contracts that include no strike pledges. Union executives have threatened any worker advocating the expansion of the strike to these locations with expulsion from the union and the loss of their job.

The union leaders “are setting our strikes up for failure,” Nate, a worker picketing in Tacoma told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The last three people working left when we got here this morning and now there’s three hundred people standing out here doing nothing. This is ineffective” Nate said.

Strikers want to shut down other locations where work is still taking place and have organized on social media, independently of the union, to expand their picket lines, pull out other carpenters and other building trades workers and shutdown several construction sites in Seattle, Bellevue, Tacoma and Redmond. This includes Microsoft buildings in Bellevue, Amazon and mixed-use office buildings in South Lake Union.

“We're trying to show everybody that we can shut these sites down, because without us, nobody else works,” Nate said.

NWUC Executive Treasurer-Secretary Evelyn Shapiro is doing the dirty work for the contractors. Shapiro was forced to call the strike last week after keeping workers on the job for months, despite the repeated rejections of the pro-company contracts she signed. She has launched a red-baiting campaign against The Peter J. McGuire Group, the Facebook group that rank-and-file carpenters have used to organize opposition. Shapiro has also denounced Seattle councilwoman Kshama Sawant, a member of the Socialist Alternative, for “interfering in the NW Carpenters Union’s democracy” and “aiding anti-union forces [who] are the only ones who benefit from this kind of political meddling.”

A video published on Facebook showed dozens of workers shouting at Shapiro--who makes $259,038 in an annual salary from the NWUC, plus additional income from other posts—for pushing the pro-company contract and sabotaging their strike. This prompted hypocritical slanders of “misogynism” from the highly paid bureaucrat’s allies.

Workers have rejected the union-backed deals because they offered a $14 raise over four years, which does not keep up with inflation rates let alone compensate workers for years of stagnant pay and high commuting costs. Further, the new contract duration would stagger contract negotiations on a different schedule than other building trades workers. In opposition to the union’s sellout agreements, workers are demanding a bare minimum $15 wage increase over three years, paid parking, and improvements in health care and pension benefits.

Todd, an apprentice who commutes from Tacoma due to high rent costs, explained the why carpenters are

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demanding a significant pay increase. “Wages haven't kept up with the cost of living in a long time, and every pay raise gets swallowed up by rising healthcare costs, which we just took a hit on and got switched to crappier health insurance plan.

“Sometimes we have to pay over $100 a week just on parking,” Todd added. “The AGC tried to appease us by offering a dollar towards parking per hour. For an 8-hour day, after taxes, that's a hair over $5 and it costs us $20 to park… [that’s] worthless. Some of the other trades have their parking completely paid for.”

Top-tier pay for carpenters is currently $46.92 an hour. However, Seattle has seen a record-breaking increase in home prices, and rent within the city is restrictively expensive. This has forced carpenters to live hours away from job sites, vastly increasing transportation costs.

The Case-Shiller index reported the largest ever one-year leap in Seattle housing prices in April of 20.2 percent. The median cost for a single-family home in Seattle is $890,444, according to Northwest Multiple Listing Service. Seattle area home prices have gone up 67.8 percent since April 2016, while home prices have gone up 41.3 percent nationally.

Median pay for carpenters in Washington in 2019 was only $59,950.

Rank-and-file workers know their bosses have made enormous profits during the pandemic by keeping workers on the job for full-day shifts and overtime. “It's impossible to do this type of work in a way that avoids spreading Covid,” Ted, another carpenter in Tacoma, reported. “But the contractors don't care about actually stopping the spread of Covid or doing the right thing to protect workers. They just want to look right.”

At an Amazon project last year, the contractors required that everyone wear a mask and stay six feet apart “when possible,” Ted explained. “Well, there's no way to work in construction and stay six feet apart. You're lifting heavy things together, holding stuff while another guy cuts or grinds something. You're working in very close quarters with people breathing all over each other.”

In the state of Washington, construction sites are the sixth highest setting for outbreaks, reporting 308 total outbreaks since the pandemic began. This data reflects broader trends across the United States, with construction workers facing high rates of infection, hospitalizations and deaths, approaching that of health care workers.

“It just didn't feel right working through Covid and risking my health and my family’s health just so we could build yet another Amazon building. We all have to commute an hour and a half each way to build structures in a place we can't afford to live in for people who grind us into dust during a pandemic, and who now are telling us that we're not worth what we're asking for.”

Some of the world’s wealthiest people live in the Seattle area, including Amazon’s Jeff Bezos who saw his personal fortune surpass the $200 billion mark on August 26. Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center admits that wages have remained stagnant for US workers for 40 years, and Washington state is no exception.

Carpenters are not only fighting the AGC and their paid stooges in the union they are fighting both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend. From the Democratic-Party controlled Seattle City Council to Governor Jay Inslee, politicians have handed out tax cuts to major corporations, given the green light to profit-driven urban development, and enforced the most regressive tax system in the country. Alongside their Republican colleagues, the Democrats created the dire conditions that carpenters and all workers confront.

There will be many attempts, including from Sawant and Socialist Alternative, to redirect the rank-and-file initiative back into safe channels, promising political and union “reform.” However, bitter experience has proven that the political establishment and pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions stand firmly on the side of the corporations.

The only way to win higher pay, benefits and safe working conditions is through a united struggle of the working class, independent from both big-business parties and the corporatist trade unions. We urge carpenters to form an independent rank-and-file strike committee, and appeal for the active support of all building trades workers, as well as nurses, grocery workers, teachers, and other sections of the working class throughout Washington state and beyond, all of whom have suffered similar consequences of rising social inequality and the impacts of the pandemic.

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