

# Mobilize the working class to support the striking Washington state carpenters!

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The nearly week-long strike by thousands of carpenters in Washington state, centered in the Seattle metro area, has reached a critical juncture. Outraged by the deliberate sabotage of the strike by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters union (UBC), which has kept most carpenters on the job since the walkout began on September 16, rank-and-file workers are seeking to expand the strike to win their demands for pay raises and a reversal of decades of UBC-backed concessions.

After seeing their livelihoods eroded by rising housing and other living expenses and working during a pandemic that has taken a deadly toll on construction workers, carpenters are taking a stand for all building trades workers and the entire working class. But decades of bitter experience and defeated strikes, beginning with the AFL-CIO's betrayal of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers' strike 40 years ago, proves that militancy and solidarity alone is not enough to defeat the enemies arrayed against the working class.

To take forward this struggle carpenters need the clearest picture of the political forces they confront, new fighting organizations democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, and a strategy to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class to support their fight.

Carpenters know they are fighting the Associated General Contractors of Washington (AGC), which is made up of some of the largest and most profitable construction firms in the US, including Turner, Kiewit and Skanska. Along with the AGC are Amazon, Microsoft and other corporations that want their projects completed as quickly and cheaply as possible. Bezos, Gates and other billionaires, who have seen their fortunes rise while nearly 700,000 people have died, fear nothing more than a revolt by the working class against social inequality and the grotesque concentration of wealth.

Behind these corporate giants stand Governor Jay Inslee and both corporate-controlled parties, which have handed

trillions in tax cuts and bailouts to big business while cutting unemployment benefits to jobless workers. Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan and the City Council are not "neutral," much less supportive of the striking carpenters. They fear the revolt of the carpenters will encourage other sections of the working class to fight, and that is why union leaders are in meetings right now trying to figure out how to crush the strike.

This nexus of the collaboration between big business, the Democrats and Republicans, and the union executives can be seen most clearly in the Project Labor Agreements (PLA), which have been used to destroy the achievements won by construction workers over generations of struggle.

While forced to sanction the walkout, UBC officials never wanted a strike and are actively working to sabotage and defeat it. Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union Executive-Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro and the national leadership are forcing 10,000 of the 12,000 area carpenters to stay on the job under the no-strike agreements contained in the PLAs and are limiting strikers to ineffective picketing of empty job sites.

UBC and Kings County Labor Council officials have launched a vicious red-baiting campaign against rank-and-file workers and the social media platforms, including The Peter J. McGuire Group, used to organize opposition. UBC officials have threatened militant workers with expulsion from the union, the loss of their jobs and legal and financial retribution for "unauthorized" picketing and exercising their rights to free speech.

There is only one description for these bureaucrats: they are scabs and company stooges.

Workers do not need "permission" from Shapiro (salary \$259,038), General President Douglas McCarron (2020 salary \$519,000) and other UBC executives to fight for their jobs and livelihoods. Like their counterparts in the other building trades unions, they have spent decades selling out workers. Their chief obsession is "market

share,” by which they mean securing the continued flow of dues income and pension contributions into their bank accounts and investment vehicles. To secure this, they must repeatedly prove to the powers-that-be that they can keep workers in a state of industrial servitude.

The revolt of the carpenters is part of a growing wave of struggles in the US and internationally, which is taking the form of a direct struggle against the pro-company unions. This started with the wave of wildcat strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona in 2018 and the revolt of the maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico in 2019. In the last year alone, Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama voted down a United Mine Workers-backed contract 1,006 to 45; Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia voted down three United Auto Workers-backed contracts; Frito-Lay and Nabisco workers have rejected pro-company agreements pushed by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM); and Dana auto parts workers voted down a deal by the United Auto Workers by 90 percent.

To the extent, however, that workers have not been able to organize independently of the corporatist unions and expand their struggles, in each case the union bureaucrats were able to regain control, isolate and wear down workers and impose the dictates of the employers.

The phrase “We are the union” is often used to encourage the illusion that workers can take the unions back from the bureaucrats and reform them. But the unions as organizations were long ago transformed into tools of corporate management and the government. The source of this was not only the corruption and cowardice of the leaders but the very nature of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions. Incapable of responding in any progressive way to the globalization of capitalist production, the continued existence of these organizations depended on them becoming the enforcers of the ever-greater exploitation of the working class to “compete” internationally.

Seattle City Councilwoman Kshama Sawant, Socialist Alternative and publications like *Labor Notes* claim the unions can be forced to fight if workers exert enough pressure on them. But bitter experience has shown the more workers fight for what they need, the more the unions and politicians crack down to defend the corporate and financial elite. Every attempt to reform the trade unions, from the Teamsters for a Democratic Union to New Directions in the UAW, has ended in failure for the working class, with the various “union reformers”

incorporated into the labor bureaucracy.

New organizations of struggle, independent of the corporatist unions and the two big business parties, are needed. Rank-and-file committees will share information, ensure democratic discussion outside of the control of the union bureaucracy, and coordinate common action.

Time cannot be wasted through fruitless appeals to the corrupt leaders of other unions, much less Inslee and the Seattle City Council, who all defend the profit interests of the corporations, businesses and investors. Instead, carpenters should organize demonstrations, rallies and mass meetings to appeal to the working class throughout the area to win their struggle. This means mobilizing teachers fighting the criminal reopening of the schools, overworked health care workers in inundated hospitals, and the millions of other workers who want to fight poverty wages and grueling work conditions. The powerful traditions of the 1919 Seattle General Strike should be revived and common action prepared to defend the carpenters against any threats of state intervention.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, which assisted workers in forming independent rank-and-file committees at Volvo Trucks, Dana and other workplaces is prepared to assist carpenters to form their own committees to unite workers across all trades and geographic regions, develop genuine workers democracy, and carry out an offensive to demand what workers need, not what the companies and unions deem acceptable.

We urge workers who want to share their voices and get involved with this fight to contact us at [comments@wsws.org](mailto:comments@wsws.org).



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