"We have dug our heels in against our own union"

Washington state carpenters speak on struggle, denounce union sabotage of strike

Our reporters
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The walkout of more than 2,000 carpenters in Seattle and across Washington state escalated Wednesday as rank-and-file workers defied the Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) and expanded the strike to other construction sites. The strike for better wages and to protect healthcare and pension benefits began on September 16 after carpenters defeated the fourth effort by NWCU to push through a pro-company contract proposal.

On the picket lines in Seattle strikers denounced the deliberate sabotage of the strike by union officials. The NWCU has ordered more than 80 percent of its 12,000 members to stay on the job at dozens of construction sites, citing previous sweetheart contracts that contain no-strike pledges. As for the official picket lines set up by the union, reporting teams from the *World Socialist Web Site* found many that were not even being manned. At one location, the union officials reportedly called for picketers at 5:30 a.m., only to disperse them an hour later.

In response to this charade, carpenters are organizing on social media to call out non-striking carpenters and other building trades workers. Workers reported on Facebook that they were able to pull out non-striking workers and shut down sites where the union agreed to a no-strike clause on Wednesday.

WSWS reporters spoke with striking carpenters in downtown Seattle about the issues in their struggle. One worker, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "The union is doing everything they can to minimize the impact of our strike and sell us out. It is very clear to me that is their goal, to mitigate the losses to the contractors instead of fighting for us."

Reporters passed out the statement "Mobilize the working class to support the striking Washington state carpenters!" and discussed the need organize rank-and-file workers independently of the union to win the strike. Responding, the worker noted, "This is on the cusp of being the largest labor movement in 20 years. [To win], I think we need to stop worrying about the installation of fear by the union. Not a moment's hesitation. We are being led to a predetermined ending, and our union does not have our back. They are working with the contractors.

"I've been a carpenter since 2007 and have been in the military for 11 years on and off. The union had absolute corruption back in 2007. Bottom line is that our union-appointed leaders are working for their benefit. They are interested more in saving face and building relationships with the contractors, rather than improving the lives of rank-and-file carpenters and the family, who they took an oath to represent and whose dues pay for their salaries."

The worker also described the out-of-control living costs in Seattle. "Carpenters are working blue-collar families. We get paid a wage that keeps us right below the middle-class line. Between the poverty line and a middle-class line. We live within proximity to some of the most expensive real estate in the country. Most of us cannot afford to live within an hour and half from where we work.

"The majority of the time, parking is not paid. I get up at 4:30 a.m., leave in my car at 4:45. I drive from 4:45-6:00 to get to the job, but being in traffic, that's just life. When I get to work for the Big Greed [Associated General Contractors of Washington-AGC] I spend $25-40 per day parking. Now take a $30 average for daily parking, multiply it by five days per

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week and you can get an idea of the amount of money taken out of our wages before we even start the job. Really, we work six days a week often to make ends meet for our families."

Another worker, Calvin, said a war was being waged "against the working class in general. The cards are so stacked against us. We all need to band together, and if we did, nobody would want for anything." Calvin said the contractors were surprised that the deal didn't pass when they had a deal with the NWCU. "The AGC said, 'Look we don't know why your guys are striking. We accepted the offer they [UBC] pitched us, and then it was voted down. A strike makes no sense.'"

"Well, it does make sense to you and me," Calvin continued, speaking to the WSWS reporter. "What's really going on is that Evelyn [Shapiro, NWCU Executive Treasurer-Secretary] is fighting her own people, it's her holding us down. I mean, it's kind of smoke and mirrors, really.

"The union had a lawyer come on to a Zoom meeting, claiming that the companies would fold within the first week. Then, all of a sudden, the union starts pulling out sweetheart agreements and now all these picketable sites are supposedly not picketable anymore." As a result of this sabotage, Calvin said, "We have dug our heels in against our own union."

Calvin called for a unified struggle among the striking carpenters and other workers. "I have been talking about all these other professions banding together. If you just take the workers in unions that already exist, like Nabisco and in other struggles, if we banded together, they couldn't stop us. The only way they hold us back is by dividing us. What I keep preaching is that they can't take our numbers, so we just need to band together in solidarity."

The WSWS reporting team also spoke to Javier who stressed that the union is attempting to divide the workers and stop all carpenters from striking. "What's weird is that we have something like different branches in the union, so like me, some of us are under different agreements. We're out here voluntarily. We can vote on the contract, but we can't strike. And if you do strike, you don't get paid. We're volunteering our time, 100% of our time."

He continued, "We're being segregated within our own union, which is really unfair. When they would say 'you're going on strike', you would see everybody, all the carpenters go on strike, but now they had verbiage in there that messes everything up for all of us. They're saying we can get penalized and fined for striking," Javier said, referring to the threats by union officials over "unauthorized" job actions.

Javier further explained how the union was trying to render the strike impotent. "I went to Tacoma yesterday and we didn't hit any job sites. Instead, we hit sites where nobody was there. The freeway was louder than us. We couldn't even chant. We were just walking in a circle. It was pointless. It's common sense, if the contractor leaves, you shut down that job site, and go to the next job site. But we're not doing that."

Another worker, Rick, who is a 4th term apprentice, said he was striking "because we need fair pay, fully paid parking, not just partial, and increases to our benefits. The AGC and our leadership are not willing to work on our behalf. I think it's time to take matters into our own hands."

To do this, carpenters need new organizations of struggle, independent of the corporatist unions and the two big business parties, to share information, ensure democratic discussion outside of the control of the union bureaucracy, and coordinate common action. Such a rank-and-file committee will not carry out fruitless appeals to the corrupt union leaders or the Democrats who run the state and the Seattle City Council but fight to mobilize the broadest sections of the working class—teachers, healthcare workers, Amazon workers—in common struggle against the corporate-government-union conspiracy to impoverish the working class.

We urge workers to contact the WSWS for information on building rank-and-file committees.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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