Seattle carpenters strike at the crossroads, as union works to suppress rank-and-file rebellion

Kayla Costa, Jerry White
27 September 2021

The 11-day strike by carpenters in the metro Seattle area has reached a crossroads. The efforts of rank-and-file workers to wage a real struggle to win their demands are being met with determined efforts by the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) to shut down the strike and impose another pro-company labor agreement.

After carpenters rejected four attempts by the NWCU to push through a deal that continued the erosion of their living standards, the union was forced to a call a strike on September 16, the first walkout in nearly two decades. From the beginning, however, the NWCU ordered 10,000 of the 12,000 carpenters to remain on the job—including at the largest public works projects, under so-called Project Labor Agreements signed with the contractors association and state and local politicians that include no-strike clauses and substandard terms.

Like other sections of workers, the carpenters are determined to overturn decades of union-backed concessions. They have sought to expand their struggle by calling out non-striking carpenters and other building trades workers. Despite the pandemic, Seattle is experiencing a construction boom driven by the new projects ordered by Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Facebook. Carpenters who cannot afford to raise a family in the area or keep up with rising fuel and other costs associated with long daily commutes are calling for a $15 wage increase over three years, increased employer contributions to health care and pensions and fully paid parking.

Construction is one of the most dangerous industries, a reality brought home by last Monday's death of 31-year-old plasterer Bryan Phillips, who was crushed to death by falling equipment at the Washington State Convention Center in downtown Seattle, one of the projects the unions has kept running during the strike. Construction sites are also among the top sources of workplace COVID-19 outbreaks, and building workers have suffered a disproportionate share of infections and deaths in Washington and other states.

The role of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters

Opposed to the strike from the beginning, officials from the NWCU and its parent organization, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC), have functioned as strikebreakers, doing everything to weaken and shut down the struggle and impose the dictates of the giant construction firms that make up the Associated General Contractors (ACG) consortium.

Among rank-and-file carpenters, there is a widespread sentiment that workers must take control of the strike into their own hands and get other building trades workers on their side if they are going to win. Small groups of carpenters, many of them organizing through the social media site, the Peter J. McGuire Group, have begun a series of wildcat protests that they say has slowed or shut down around a dozen additional job sites.

The union has viciously cracked down on these "unauthorized" actions, deciding on Friday to shut down all picket sites and encouraging the rest of the 2,000 striking carpenters to turn against the workers involved. Facing widespread opposition, the NWCU set up pickets at 11 sites yesterday. But this is only a maneuver, which is a prelude to the shutdown of the strike and an attempt to impose another concessionary deal that has already been drawn up behind the scenes.

To oppose this, carpenters and other building trades workers should form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UBC and AFL-CIO bureaucrats. These committees should expand the struggle not only throughout the construction industry but among broader sections of the working class, including educators, Amazon and Boeing workers who are all fighting impossibly high living costs and the criminal sacrifice of human life for profit during the pandemic.

The NWCU and local building trades unions have launched a witch-hunt against militant workers aimed at bullying carpenters into surrendering. Lawyers for the NWCU have already sent out letters to organizers of the Peter J. McGuire Group demanding that they "cease and desist" from advocating "wildcat strikes" and threatening to hold their leaders "personally responsible for any resulting violations and will pursue all legal remedies available under state and federal law as well as the UBC Constitution."

In a last-ditch effort to intimidate the strikers, NWCU Executive Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro, Kings County Labor Council leader Nicole Grant and building trades union leaders Monty Anderson and Chris McLain have resorted to redbaiting members of the Peter J. McGuire Group and Seattle City Councilwoman and Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant, who has made public statements in support of the strikers. Their crude attacks on "extremist Marxists," which echo Trump's right-wing rantings against socialism, are aimed at blocking the radicalization of workers and their revolt against the corporatist unions. Anderson recently complained to a right-wing radio host that the "membership was being estranged from the leadership and was separating from the herd."

Workers must be on guard against provocations by the union officials, who are more than willing to collude with the courts, the police and federal agents to frame up and jail militant workers. The most dangerous folly would be to underestimate the ruthlessness of the union bureaucracy, which sees in the upsurge of the carpenters an existential threat to their lucrative relations with the corporations.

NWCU Executive Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro got $259,038 in union compensation in 2020. Her boss, UBC General President Douglas

© World Socialist Web Site

McCarron, pocketed $519,000, and his 10 underlings on the UBC executive board got another $3.7 million combined. In 2020, the UBC national headquarters disbursed $123 million on “union administration,” “general overhead,” “purchase of investments and fixed assets” and “political activities and lobbying,” while paying “$0” on strike activities. In recent years UBC leaders of Michigan and New Jersey affiliates have been jailed for stealing pension funds.

The role of Socialist Alternative

While there are many militant carpenters who look to the Peter J. McGuire Group to express their opposition, it must be said that the political outlook of the group’s leaders is fatally flawed. No matter how sharp their rhetoric against the UBC bureaucrats, in the end they hope to convince Shapiro & Co. to adopt more militant policies and reform the union.

This false and naïve conception has been reinforced by Sawant and the Socialist Alternative, which have done everything to conceal the irreconcilable class conflict between the carpenters and the working class on the one side, and their implacable enemies who run the NWCU, UBC and AFL-CIO on the other. At every point Sawant has sought to keep workers tied to the corporatist unions and prevent the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the Democratic Party, which dominates state and local politics.

In her remarks at a public rally on Saturday, Sawant presented the sabotage of the strike as the “mistaken direction of the leadership” who were pursuing a “losing strategy,” not the deliberate and politically conscious decisions of union executives whose material interests are completely separated from and hostile to those of the working class.

Sawant invited Shapiro and Grant to the Saturday event. She said, “I believe for the labor movement to win victories we need transparent discussion and even debate on strategy and tactics,” she said, adding, “I do feel it is unfortunate that neither one of them has joined us here.”

At a similar event Thursday morning, Sawant begged Monty Anderson, executive secretary of the Seattle Building and Construction Trades Council, and Chris McLain, vice president of the Pacific Northwest Ironworkers, “to come here and talk to us.” Her cringing appeals to “Brother Anderson” have not been slowed by the fact that the Seattle building trades union executive is one of the leading figures in the right-wing campaign to recall Sawant and throw her off the city council.

Far from calling on workers to break decisively with the corporatist unions and build new organizations of struggle genuinely controlled by workers themselves, Sawant functions as an adviser to the union bureaucrats, suggesting various measures that they should take to better fool the workers into believing they “represent” them.

In repeated letters and public statements, Sawant urged Shapiro and other “elected labor leaders” to reduce their salaries to the level of an average worker “so they can be more in touch with the conditions of the workers they represent.”

Sawant and SA claim the union executives, though they may have been led astray by the bosses, can be returned to fold. But the union bureaucrats understand that their privileged positions depend entirely on proving again and again their value in suppressing the class struggle.

Finally, Sawant has introduced meaningless legislation in the Seattle City Council that would supposedly require contractors to pay for workers’ parking fees and increase local authority to investigate wage theft in the industry. The aim of all of this is to sow illusions in the Democratic Party. But at every level, from the Biden administration to Governor Jay Inslee and Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, the Democrats serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

The Democrats have handed over trillions in corporate tax cuts and bailouts and kept schools and workplaces open so workers can produce profits even as nearly 700,000 people died in the pandemic. Sawant’s “progressive elected officials” would also not hesitate to send police to crush the carpenters if their rebellion expanded and triggered a broader movement of the working class.

If Sawant refers to the class enemies of the carpenters as her “brothers and sisters,” it is because the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative speaks not for the working class but for left-talking union bureaucrats, “progressive elected officials” and other affluent layers of the upper middle class. Sawant’s own American Federation of Teachers has played the leading role in helping the Biden administration herd educators and children back into infected schools.

Build a rank-and-file strike committee!

The Seattle strike is part of the growing resistance of workers in the US and around the world, including educators, Dana auto parts workers and others. To fight, the working class needs the truth and new organizations of struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on carpenters to take the fight into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike committee, completely independent of the corporatist unions. This committee should establish lines of communication between construction workers and with other sections of workers, including Seattle and Washington state educators, Amazon and Boeing workers.

A rank-and-file strike committee will unite and coordinate joint action with all workers coming into struggle against social inequality and the criminal sacrifice of life for profit during the pandemic.

In opposition to the threats by the NWCU, UBC and AFL-CIO bureaucrats, a rank-and-file committee will fight for the broadest support in the working class, including mass demonstrations, rallies and joint strikes, to defend the striking carpenters and oppose any state intervention against them.

This must be combined with a political struggle by the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the fight for a workers’ government to replace the capitalist profit system with socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site