

Carpenters union attempt to shut down Washington state strike, push through sellout deal

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On Tuesday, the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) ordered 2,000 striking carpenters to go back to work Wednesday after announcing another tentative agreement with the Associated General Contractors (AGC).

In an anti-democratic move, the union sent carpenters back to work without the possibility to read, let alone vote on, the tentative agreement. Many carpenters have reportedly defied the back-to-work order and there is a widespread support for a continuation and expansion of the strike for better pay, pensions, and working conditions in opposition to the strikebreaking by the NWCU.

Carpenters should organize now to demand the immediate release of the contract and sufficient time to study it before any ratification vote. They should vote 'no' on the deal and resume the strike. To carry on this fight, carpenters need to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by formation a rank-and-file committee, which is completely independent of the pro-company unions.

The carpenters walked out in Seattle and western Washington state on September 16, for the first time since 2003, after rejecting four separate sellout tentative agreements pushed by the NWCU, which would have continued the givebacks to the contractors and the erosion of the standard of living. The NWCU blocked a strike by all 12,000 area carpenters and kept 10,000 on the job under the terms of sweetheart contracts called Project Labor Agreements, which include no-strike pledges on projects receiving government funding or tax abatements.

The latest tentative agreement is almost identical to the previous ones rejected by rank-and-file carpenters.

The wage increase is a mere \$10.02 over three years, only 21 cents more than the previous offer, and far below the minimum demand of \$15 made by rank-and-file carpenters.

Another major demand of the carpenters is for workers to be fully compensated for parking costs, since workers must bring their vehicles and tools to downtown construction sites, and parking could cost \$40 or more a day. The tentative agreement only includes an expanded Seattle parking zone and an increase in hourly parking cost compensation from \$1 to \$1.50.

During a press meeting Wednesday, Evelyn Shapiro, NWCU executive secretary-treasurer, said, "Sometimes people think that a strike produces automatic big dollars at the end of the game and that's not usually how it works." While telling carpenters to lower their expectations, Shapiro has no problem pocketing the "automatic big dollars" from her \$259,000 a year salary.

Shapiro and other union bureaucrats hope the loss of wages during the strike will be enough to pressure workers into submission. Ryan Case, a member of the union's bargaining committee who said the costs of the two-week strike, including the "strike assessment" the union charged non-striking carpenters, was "financial encouragement" for carpenters to ratify the labor agreement. Instead of paying out strike benefits from the huge assets in the bank accounts of the NWCU and its parent union, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, the union bureaucracy took two hours of pay per day from the carpenters it ordered to stay on the job.

Workers are outraged by the anti-democratic actions by the NWCU, which many carpenters view as a paid

arm of the private contractors. One worker, Jason, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “It is the same contract as TA4 with the fourth year removed and parking moved from the third year to the second year of the contract. In my opinion, it is nowhere near where we should be. We are still not closing the wage gap with the other trades. Going back now is no sign of strength. Everyone I’ve talked to said they did not go in today. Most said they won’t be going in until a TA is ratified.”

Workers are also calling for a “no” vote. Many are posting comments in the Peter J. McGuire Group on Facebook to express their anger. Pointing to Ryan Case’s comments, Mitchell, a carpenter, said, “Did he just say the strike assessment is ‘financial encouragement’? Well at least he’s honest enough to admit the strike assessment is not about helping our brothers and sisters, it’s a tool used to influence your vote.”

Another worker, Jeffery, said, “Anyone who still believes that the UBC has our best interest is completely blind. I’m being fined \$100 every day I work. I can’t afford to vote no on this joke of a TA but I’m going to.”

The experience of the strike confirms the perspective advanced by the WSWs. On October 1, we wrote, “As the WSWs has warned since the beginning of the strike, the union will not respond to rank-and-file pressure by waging a more militant fight. In fact, the NWCu has only become more determined to isolate and end the struggle. For workers to carry their fight forward, the strike must be taken into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of the NWCu.”

Despite the support the WSWs has received in our coverage, the leaders of the Peter J. McGuire Group have attempted to block certain articles from the WSWs from being posted and banned two writers for the WSWs and members of the Socialist Equality Party from the Facebook group shortly after they posted the article, “Seattle carpenters strike at the crossroads, as union works to suppress rank-and-file rebellion.”

At the time, we warned, “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 warning has been totally vindicated. During the press briefing by Evelyn Shapiro on Wednesday, she stressed that “we made the decision to invite some of the oppositional voices specifically to the table. We were grateful to have one particularly at the table that was designated by the oppositional group.”

Seattle City Councilwoman Kshama Sawant has also played a particularly rotten role, calling on “sister” Shapiro to do the right thing and outline a strategy to “win the strike.” The WSWs warned that the union apparatus would do no such thing, as they have material interests which are diametrically opposed to the carpenters and the whole working class.

The more the workers fight, the more determined the union is to crack down. The NWCu and the local building trades initiated a witch hunt against militant workers, which was aimed at shutting down the strike as well as sending “cease and desist” orders to organizers of the Peter J. McGuire Group to bar them from advocating “wildcat strikes.”

The strike by Washington carpenters is part of a growing rebellion of the working class against the corporations and the union apparatuses. In order for workers across industries to organize and fight back against the decades of givebacks and concessions, they need new organizations of struggle.

We urge carpenters and all construction workers to form rank-and-file committees to defeat the sellout contract, expand the strike and mobilize educators, Amazon, Boeing and other workers to defeat the gang-up of big business, the unions and both corporate-controlled parties. The WSWs and Socialist Equality Party will do everything we can to assist workers in forming these committees. For more information, contact us at comments@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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