

“We voted down the same contract four times”

Washington state carpenters union forces through sellout contract

Bryan Dyne
12 October 2021

Carpenters in Seattle, Tacoma and across western Washington state narrowly ratified a union-backed sellout contract by a vote of 54 to 46 percent, according to an announcement late Monday by the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU). This was the fifth effort by the NWCU to push through an agreement favorable to the Associated General Contractors (AGC) after months of resistance by rank-and-file carpenters, which included a three-week strike.

Large numbers of carpenters abstained from the vote, disgusted by the treachery of the union. Only 5,318 workers voted, less than half of the union's 12,000 members. Of those, 2,853 voted to ratify the deal, less than a quarter of the membership.

From the beginning of the negotiations, the NWCU and its parent union, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC), have functioned as tools of the contractors and open strikebreakers. After repeated “no” votes, including a three-to-one rejection in June, the NWCU was forced to call a strike on September 16, but only called out 2,000 out of the 12,000 carpenters. Then last week, the union announced a new deal and “suspended” the strike even before workers saw, let alone voted on, the three-year contract. It then rushed through a ratification vote giving workers as little time as possible to study the details of agreement.

Workers are outraged over the deal, which only provides a \$10-an-hour raise over three years, well below the \$15-an-hour increase workers demanded to keep up with skyrocketing costs of living in the Seattle area. Top-paid carpenters will now earn \$49.18 an hour, well below the \$58.29 an hour needed to support a family of four in the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area, according to the MIT Living Wage calculator.

“It's messed up, the corruption, the blatant disregard for

what members wanted,” one worker told the WWS. “It makes you feel embarrassed to be in the carpenters union, by having leadership that does whatever the hell they want.

“The union undermined this process from the very beginning,” he continued. “We voted down the same contract four times. When it finally came to a strike, they slow-rolled the strike and sent people to empty holes that weren't even being built yet. They sent notifications to the contractors to let them know what days we would or would not picket a third site, which would allow them to communicate and schedule with other trades and deliveries of materials to keep their jobs going. That's not a strike. When you get to the point where you have to strike you shut down every job possible and for sure you shut down all the biggest jobs every single day.”

The carpenters voted by 76 percent against the first tentative contract, which provided only an \$8.64-an-hour increase over three years. Rather than sanctioning a walkout, the NWCU extended the contract with a no-strike clause as it attempted to push through a similar deal. On July 3, the second deal was defeated by 52 percent, followed by a 60 percent rejection of the third deal on August 5. The fourth deal, which was extended to four years, was rejected by 56 percent on September 11.

On September 16, the NWCU sanctioned a strike but only called out a sixth of its membership, citing no-strike pledges with the AGC and various state and local Democratic Party politicians. It warned rank-and-file workers that “wildcats” and “sickouts” or “picketing without the express permission of authorized officials of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters” (PNWRCC) would not be tolerated.

“We were told by [the] PNWRCC that we were only allowed to picket four sites and they were clearly sites

that would have zero impact on the contractors,” another worker told the WSWs. “They threatened us with legal action if we disobeyed them,” he said.

The strike was only expanded after carpenters organized opposition to the union’s strikebreaking through Facebook, including through the Peter J. McGuire Group. When the strike was shut down, the worker told the WSWs, “We were picketing 18 different high-profile sites in multiple counties, including a multi-billion-dollar job at Microsoft.”

The militant carpenters were subjected to a vicious red-baiting campaign by NWCU Secretary-Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro-O’Conner and King County Labor Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Grant. The latter denounced members of Peter J. McGuire Group as “Marxist extremists” who were wreaking “havoc” within the union.

Throughout the struggle, the WSWs opposed the attacks on the social media group and called on carpenters to build a rank-and-file strike committee, completely independent of the union, to expand the strike to all construction sites and building trades workers and to reach out to educators, health care workers, Amazon and Boeing workers and other workers to back the carpenters’ fight.

While many carpenters looked to the Peter J. McGuire group for a lead, the perspective of its leadership—of pressuring the union bureaucracy to adopt more militant tactics and reform itself—was “fatally flawed,” the WSWs warned.

These false and naïve conceptions were reinforced by Seattle Councilwoman and Socialist Alternative leader Kshama Sawant, with whom the group had close relations. Sawant presented the sabotage of the strike as the “mistaken direction of the leadership” who were pursuing a “losing strategy,” not the deliberate decisions of union executives whose material interests have been long separated from the working class. In repeated letters and public statements, Sawant urged Shapiro (salary \$259,038) 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.”

During her tenure in office, Sawant has done everything she can to direct workers struggles into “official” channels of the union, while calling on workers to pressure “progressive elected officials,” i.e., Democratic Party politicians. These include making appeals to the American Federation of Teachers and President Joe Biden

as they coordinate to herd educators and children back into pandemic-infected schools.

The hostility of the union toward its members was not limited to Seattle, and was also on display in St. Louis. The day the strike vote results were announced, an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* revealed that the St. Louis-Kansas City Carpenters Regional Council was likely embezzling millions of dollars during the tenure of its now ex-Executive Secretary-Treasurer Al Bond. Payroll for union officials overall jumped 63 percent to \$20.5 million and the number of union bureaucrats climbed from 100 to 240 in a year. Bond’s own salary ballooned 50 percent to \$303,000.

At the same time, the union’s debt grew to \$8 million, suggesting it was taking on debt to finance these operations. The union also loaned out millions to developers, including more than \$3 million of its members’ money to two Northside projects, ostensibly the companies the union was fighting against. There are also some evidence union bureaucrats were looting the union’s health benefit plan.

The struggle of the Washington state carpenters is far from over. Construction workers have been disproportionately hit by COVID-19 and the industry has one of the highest rates of industrial accidents, along with suicides caused by chronic pain due to the physically demanding nature of the work. Living costs continue to rise and as the impact of this sellout contract hits, carpenters will be driven into struggle again.

The carpenters’ walkout, despite its betrayal, is part of the growing strike wave that includes nurses, Kellogg’s food-processing workers and impending struggles by Deere, Dana, Kaiser Permanente and Hollywood movie and television workers.

Carpenters must draw the necessary conclusions. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, must be built to unite every section of the working class against the corporate-government attack on jobs, working conditions and living standards. These organizations will not make fruitless appeals to the union bureaucracy but will mobilize the independent power of all workers against the subordination of lives and livelihoods to corporate profit.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact