

Seattle-area concrete workers strike enters third month

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In the Seattle metro area, 330 concrete workers across six companies are entering their third month on strike as negotiations remain stalled.

On November 19, 34 workers at Gary Merlino Construction Co. went on strike followed by workers at Stoneway Concrete, Cadman, CalPortland/Glacier, Salmon Bay Sand, and Gravel and Lehigh Cement.

The workers for these six companies started their strike based on the companies' "refusal to bargain in good faith" after the Teamsters Local 174 contract expired on July 31, 2021.

The striking workers are demanding improved contract language and economic packages already agreed to by all the other construction companies covered by the regional AGC Agreement, such as increases in wages and a new retirees' health plan that the employers pay into.

The Microsoft Redmond, Washington campus modernization project is one of the construction sites impacted by the strike, as well as several smaller projects.

Four Sound Transit light rail projects in Lynnwood, Federal Way, East Link and downtown Redmond have been shorted about 8,900 cubic yards of concrete over the last month. This is equivalent to about 890 truckloads of cement, which was to be used in the construction of guideways, retaining walls, stations and garages.

John Gallagher, the public information officer for Sound Transit, said, "Sound Transit has joined with Washington State Department of Transportation, King County and the City of Seattle in calling for the parties to return to the negotiating table immediately with the help of an unbiased mediator so that a mutually acceptable agreement can be reached that moves our projects and our region forward." Gallagher also said

that contractors have laid off over 40 workers due to the lack of work caused by the strike.

Rick Hicks, secretary-treasurer for Teamsters Local 174, said in a statement, "We have major construction projects halted, affordable housing projects losing money they cannot afford to lose and laid-off families growing more desperate by the day."

Hicks went on to say that the union had not heard anything from the spokesman of Gary Merlino Construction, Charlie Oliver, for almost six weeks. "The arrogance from the employers in this case is absolutely astounding and cannot be allowed to continue unchecked." Hicks asked for a fair deal that "treats our members with the same respect already shown to other construction trades when negotiating their contracts earlier this year."

Despite Hicks' claims that the union is seeking a contract that "treats our members with respect," when the Teamsters cement workers' contract expired in July, the union did everything it could to avoid going on strike at the same time as the carpenters, who walked out in September. A joint, coordinated strike would have immeasurably strengthened both carpenters and cement workers.

The Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) held back its own strike by having the membership repeatedly vote on a sellout contract. Only after it became clear the membership would not accept it did they call the strike action starting on September 6.

Even after being forced to call a strike, the NWCU only called 2,000 of its 12,000 carpenters to picket, citing Project Labor Agreements (PLAs) and sweetheart deals that prevented their most lucrative sites from being shut down.

The carpenter strike ended in mid-October after the fifth TA was sent for ratification, again after rank-and-

file workers had been paid starvation strike pay for weeks, forcing them to reconsider the same sellout they had previously voted down.

Even though the Teamsters Local 174 contract expired on July 31 and members voted unanimously on August 1 to authorize a strike, the concrete strike did not begin until months later when Gary Merlino Construction workers set up pickets on November 19 and other concrete workers joined the strike in the following days.

The striking concrete workers must learn the lessons of the carpenters' strike sellout. It is clear the unions were determined to prevent the 12,000 carpenters and 330 cement workers from joining forces and striking simultaneously, although this would clearly be in the best interests of the workers. However, the unions were determined to prevent militant action by workers that might disrupt their cozy relations with the bosses, who favor them with perks of all kinds, legal and illicit.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in October, approximately one out of five on-the-job deaths in the United States are in the construction industry. Almost 60 percent of construction workers are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 due to age, medical conditions and other risk factors, such as a high rate of smoking. Construction workers also have a high incidence of chronic pain, substance abuse and suicide due to the greater risk of injury, job strain, long work hours, limited family time, social isolation and employment uncertainty.

In order to win their demands, concrete workers along with all construction trades workers must form a network of rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-management unions that are seeking to undermine and isolate their struggles. These committees will allow rank-and-file workers to organize a fight for better pay, benefits and workplace conditions based on the principle that workers' livelihoods and lives are more important than private profit.



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