

Portland, Oregon municipal workers vote to strike

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Last Thursday, members of the District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU) in Portland, Oregon, voted to authorize a strike after overwhelmingly rejecting the city's "last, best and final offer." The 1,100 municipal workers voted by 86 percent to walk out, according to DCTU President Rob Martineau.

The DCTU is a multi-union coalition, which includes American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 189, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 48, Operating Engineers Local 701, Machinists District Lodge 24, Plumbers Local 290 and Painters and Allied Trades District Council 5. These workers make up approximately 16 percent of the City of Portland's workforce and include workers like building inspectors, water treatment, traffic sign repair, clerical staff and maintenance workers.

Contract negotiations have been stalled for weeks, primarily over wages and benefits. In the latest contract offer, Portland officials proposed a minor cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of 1.6 percent retroactive to July 1, 2021, and an additional five percent COLA on July 1, 2022. The deal also included a one-time \$3,000 bonus. Under conditions where workers are risking their lives amid rising COVID-19 infection rates and seeing their income eaten up by an average annual inflation rate of 7 percent, the city's offer was clearly not enough for workers.

Mike Elger, a vehicle and equipment mechanic who has worked for the city for 30 years, told Oregon Public Broadcasting (OBP), "We're trying to get the city to open up the wallet and start paying a fair wage for their services. They call us essential employees and we feel that should come with some benefit at least in compensation."

Oregon Governor Kate Brown boasts of "the lowest

infection and mortality rates in the nation." But her administration has been forcing schools and workplaces to remain open and operate during the "worst surge in hospitalizations during this pandemic," which has caused her to call on the Oregon National Guard to help supplement Oregon hospitals overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients.

After weeks of impasse and demonstrations in front of City Hall and the Portland Bureau of Transportation office, the decision announced Thursday gives workers the ability to go on strike 10 days after the DCTU gives notice to the city. A spokesperson for Portland's Office of Management and Finance, Heather Hafer, said that as of Thursday the city had not yet received that formal notification of the vote results and the intent to strike.

In early January, the City of Portland issued a statement about the negotiations, saying, "We feel confident that the offer the City has provided the District Council of Trade Unions and its members meets many of the needs raised by the DCTU during the course of these negotiations." City officials claimed these workers already make a median wage of more than \$73,000 per year and that their contract offer should be adequate. Even if this were the case, workers in the Pacific Northwest are feeling the purchasing power of their wages squeezed by ballooning housing costs and the rising costs of goods.

On January 14, the DCTU filed an unfair labor practice complaint against the City of Portland alleging the violation of an Oregon law which states that public employees are not allowed to "interfere with, restrain or coerce employees" who are exercising their labor rights. The complaint alleges that city supervisors polled union members on whether they would support a strike, told new union members that they could not participate in the vote, and told workers that vacation

requests would be denied due to the impending walkout.

Despite the rhetoric of the DCTU officials and a planned union rally at City Hall next Thursday, workers can expect that the unions will do everything to delay or prevent a strike to protect their close relations with Mayor Ted Wheeler, Governor Kate Brown and other Democrats who control the municipal government and both houses of the state legislature.

Construction workers in the Pacific Northwest have recently experienced such treachery from the unions, as carpenters and cement workers have had to struggle against unions which have sought to isolate and sabotage their own strikes. Those strikes were intentionally scheduled to prevent the 12,000 carpenters and 330 cement workers from joining forces and striking simultaneously in the clear interests of the workers. The Teamsters Local 174 contract expired on July 31, 2021, and members voted unanimously on August 1 to authorize a strike. But the union did not call a walkout until months later, on November 19, to prevent a coordinated strike with carpenters who struck between September and October last year.

The Northwest Carpenters Union cited the no-strike clauses contained in the sweetheart “Project Labor Agreements” it signed with the construction firms to prevent 10,000 of their 12,000 members from striking at all. These deals were drawn up with the Democratic Party and imposed at construction sites, which received government tax cuts and funding. The remaining 2,000 carpenters who were “allowed” to picket were sent by union bureaucrats to empty and finished job sites, rendering the strike ineffective. Much of the leadership of the carpenters’ union, including NWCU Secretary-Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro-O’Conner, had since resigned under allegations of “improprieties” with union funds.

Union corruption doesn’t come out of nowhere, however. Instead, it flows from the very character of the pro-capitalist unions themselves, which function as tools of corporate management and the government. From public sector workers to industrial workers, in the US and around the world, workers are increasingly coming into conflict with the unions that enforce the dictates of the banks and giant corporations, including the demands for austerity in Portland, the home of Nike sportswear and its billionaire owner Phil Knight.

New organizations are needed for workers to successfully carry out their struggles. The WSWS calls on Portland municipal workers to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees to unite every section of the working class. The independent power of the united working class alone can fight against the corporate-government attack on workers’ lives and livelihoods.



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