

Portland city workers authorize strike action for February 10

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City workers in Portland, Oregon, have authorized to strike on Thursday, February 10, after two years of negotiations have failed to arrive at an agreement. Workers voted by 86 percent on January 20 to go on strike which, barring a tentative contract settlement under ongoing negotiations with a mediator, would be their first since 2001.

The District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU), an alliance of six trade unions—AFSCME Local 189, IBEW Local 48, Operating Engineers Local 701, Machinists District Lodge 24, Plumbers Local 290 and Painters and Allied Trades District Council 5—declared an impasse after the city responded with its “last, best and final” offer on December 20.

Roughly 1100 workers, including maintenance workers, clerical staff and mechanics, representing 16 percent of the city’s workforce, overwhelmingly rejected the city’s proposal of a one-time bonus of \$3,000 in lieu of wage increases of 2 percent for the first and second year of the contract and longevity increases, which fall far below the rise of inflation.

The union had agreed to a 1.6 percent cost-of-living adjustment retroactive to July 1, 2021, another 1 to 5 percent cost-of-living adjustment on July 1 of this year and next year, according to Northwest Labor Press, but even the gain of a 2 percent increase, with a 7 percent inflation rate last year, would result in a loss of real wages.

In May 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the city’s general fund losing \$75 million to \$100 million, the DCTU signed a Letter of Agreement that required their members to take eight furlough days by October of that year and to defer a 2.9 percent cost-of-living raise six months to January 1, 2021. Rob Martineau, president of the DCTU, said that “In the beginning of the pandemic we offered

concessions, and they certainly took us up on those.”

Two other unions representing another 1500 city workers signed variations on that agreement. The unions claimed that furlough days used by July 25 would qualify for unemployment benefits enhanced by money from the federal CARES Act.

The strike would shut down multiple bureaus which maintain city functions: Development Services, Transportation, Housing, with the Water Bureau comprising 575 employees, and others. Jaymee Cuti, spokeswoman for the Portland Water Bureau, said they were prepared for a strike. “The Portland Water Bureau has conducted strike planning in prior negotiation cycles, and citywide planning efforts are underway to ensure continuity of all essential services.”

Multnomah County, where Portland is located, is currently reporting the highest number of cases and deaths in the state. Roughly 104 thousand COVID-19 cases and nearly a thousand deaths have been recorded in the county since the pandemic began. But the proposed contract, according to the AFSCME highlights on its website, fails to provide any protections for workers. This aligns completely with the herd immunity policies of the Democratic Party—which dominates city and state politics—push to reopen schools and businesses under the mantra of “living with the virus.”

The last strike of Portland city workers took place in 2001, which lasted only 45 minutes until the union shut it down by reaching a tentative agreement. In 2014, workers almost voted to strike until the union reached a deal at the last minute. Despite the rhetoric of the DCTU officials, the union will do everything in its power to stop the strike from taking place in order to stay in the good graces of the Democratic Party.

In order for this strike to be successful, workers

should reject any attempt by the union to preemptively shut the strike down and set up their own rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the union and the Democratic Party. The WSWs calls on Portland city workers to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees to unite every section of the working class.



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