

Unions push through sellout agreement to call off strike of Portland, Oregon municipal workers

Our reporters
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On Wednesday evening, a coalition of six unions called off a strike of over 1,100 Portland, Oregon city workers, less than 24 hours before it was set to begin, after pushing through the city’s “last and final” offer. According to the AFSCME Local 189 website, the contract was approved by 58 percent of the membership on Tuesday night, although further details about the vote count have yet to be released. If a strike had occurred, it would have been the first since 2001 and involved 16 percent of the city’s total employees.

Workers have been without a new contract for nearly two years, during which their livelihoods have been at the mercy of rising food and gas prices during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation in the West Region, which includes Portland, was 7.7 percent during the past year.

Yet the offer accepted by the unions—including representatives of Local 189, along with IBEW Local 48, Operating Engineers Local 701, Machinists District Lodge 24, Plumbers Local 290 and Painters and Allied Trades District Council 5—only includes a 1.6 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), which will be applied starting last July. A further 5 percent increase begins this coming July. Both are well below past and current inflation.

The final offer from the city also includes a \$3,000 signing bonus, a 1 to 5 percent wage increase in 2023, and a 3 to 7 percent wage increase in 2024, based on COLA indices set by the US government.

Workers previously voted by 86 percent on January 20 to reject a nearly identical offer and authorize the strike, which was later set for February 10. Ninety-one percent of all members participated in that vote.

There is immense anger at the District Council of

Trade Unions (DCTU) for squashing their strike and forcing through a sellout, at the precise point when it was drawing widespread support from other workers across the city and gaining national attention. In routine fashion, the Portland Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) said nothing of the betrayal, sharing one Twitter post in “solidarity” with the unions who left workers in the dark and pushed through the widely-hated contract.

AFSCME Local 189 has the greatest share of the total DCTU membership by a longshot. According the figures released to workers, the contract only passed in the allied painters’ union with 3 “yes” votes and the AFSCME local with 485 “yes” votes and 215 “no” votes. The other four locals containing electricians, machinists and others rejected the agreement with anywhere from 75 to 95 percent voting “no.”

Workers are reporting on Facebook and other social media platforms that the union heads were previously not recommending either a “yes” or “no” vote to the membership. Then on Monday when nearly half the votes were already in, likely in opposition to the city’s offer, workers said that AFSCME 189 officials suddenly switched and campaigned for a “yes” vote to sway the totals in that direction for a narrow victory. AFSCME officials called it a “strong contract” which the unions “worked tirelessly to negotiate.”

“Our Vice President and another ranking member said the DCTU was encouraging and supporting a ‘yes’ vote, so in my eyes that’s swaying votes of anyone who wasn’t sure,” one worker at the Water Bureau told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Not to mention, so many people didn’t vote simply because they were not informed when or how and never received emails to vote.”

He continued, “Lots were left in the dark or had little to no info. A few guys on my crew showed up asking how to vote Wednesday morning and were told by a chapter chair it was too late even though the email said we [could] vote till 7 a.m. on Wednesday morning. I had to call our president at 6:30 a.m. and send him their emails, and they did get to vote. Whether they were counted or not, who knows?”

A different worker wrote on the DCTU Facebook page, “Now, union members are asking for how to get their votes back to re-vote. Not cool!” On Reddit, another worker stated that a “1.6% COLA adjustment is basically a spit-in-the-face.”

Rank-and-file workers have been determined to fight for substantial wage increases to keep up with inflation and rising housing costs, full staffing to ease long work weeks, and protections for workers’ health and safety. Workers have reported concerns with poor sanitation and growing levels of crime, especially in downtown Portland, which has doubled in the last two years.

But the union and city contract does not mention “coronavirus,” “COVID-19,” “mask,” “vaccine” nor any other public health measures to help protect municipal workers from the ongoing pandemic. To date, there have been more than 107,000 cases in Multnomah County and over 1,000 deaths.

The Water Bureau worker explained, “I help maintain and repair the water system when stuff breaks. I install new hydrants and services as well as renew old ones that are no longer up to current standards.” He continued, “When we do our week of on-call and get mainbreaks, it can get crazy. Last on-call I believe I had 30 hours of [overtime] by Wednesday night. It’s not uncommon to work a 20-hour shift.”

Portland’s city politics are dominated by the Democratic Party, as is Oregon’s legislature and Governor Kate Brown’s office. Like in California and other “blue” states, the Democratic Party has overseen a drastic growth of social inequality and the erosion of workers’ conditions as much as the Republicans.

Throughout negotiations, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and the council have been demanding real wage cuts, repeating the lie that there is no money to fairly compensate workers. That worn out statement is contradicted by last year’s \$67 million budget surplus and the profits of major Oregon-based corporations like Nike and Intel. Phil Knight of Nike saw his wealth

nearly double from March 2020 to July 2021 to \$58 billion.

Portland city workers, like many other sections of the working class around the world, have been forced to risk the lives of themselves and their families throughout the past two years of reckless policies to fully open the economy and herd children back into schools. Meanwhile, the financial oligarchy has engorged itself with trillions of dollars from the inflation of stock market values.

The steep rise of living expenses and the intensification of exploitative conditions are the means through which the ruling class is making the working class pay for its profiteering. In this context, the struggle in Portland is one among a series of union-enforced contracts imposing real wage cuts, erosion of benefits, and unsafe working conditions, including at Nabisco, Frito-Lay and Kellogg’s, the Seattle-area carpenters strike, the Portland-area Fred Meyer strike and the Volvo and John Deere strikes. The Biden administration is heavily relying on the unions to prevent strikes and keep supply chains humming, particularly as the federal government prepares for military conflicts with Russia and China.

The key task that lies ahead is the development of independent rank-and-file committees to organize the struggles of the working class independently of the unions. This network of independent organizations can effectively unify and mobilize the working class to fight for fair wages and living conditions, wielding opposition against inequality, threat of war and the pandemic disaster. We urge all Portland city workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*, share your voice, and join the international fight to build rank-and-file committees.



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