

Vigor Marine shipyard workers in Portland and Seattle vote again to authorize strike

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Shipyard workers at Vigor Marine in Portland and Seattle voted to authorize a strike for the second time in mid-March but are still be kept on the job by the metal trades unions at the commercial shipbuilding and repair facility. The contracts for 900 workers at Vigor expired on November 30, 2021, and in December workers voted overwhelmingly by 95 percent to authorize a strike. In the last vote on March 15, two-thirds of the workers still authorized strike action, despite the efforts by the unions to discourage them.

Vigor Marine, a Titan Acquisition Holdings company based in Portland, Oregon, employs approximately 2,300 workers in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska. At the completion of the previous contract, the company offered workers a proposed agreement with a \$1,250 signing bonus and hourly raises of \$0.35 the first year, \$0.60 the second year, and \$0.75 the third year.

After the initial company offer was rejected by workers, Vigor came back with a second offer of a \$2,000 ratification bonus with \$1.10, \$1.25, and \$1.40 per hour yearly raises for the three-year contract. The AFL-CIO Metal Trades Department—which is made up of the Boilermakers, International Brotherhood of Electric Workers, Painters, Laborers, Sheet Metal, Pipefitters, Machinists, Teamsters and Operating Engineers—brought this proposal back for a vote on March 4, but workers rejected it again.

Facing immense opposition from rank-and-file workers, union officials attempted to distance themselves from the contract they tried to foist on workers. Scott Oldham, president of the Portland Metal Trades Council and the Painters' union representative, said, "I think their general thought was that with the price that they're paying for gas and groceries, coupled with the inflation rate, they felt like it was not enough."

"Based on what the membership reported in their

surveys, we're a long ways apart on economics," said Ben Heurung, the Western Region general representative for the Metal Trades Department.

An average shipyard journeyman makes about \$35 per hour, which is about \$72,800 per year before taxes. The company's tentative agreement included a raise of a little over 3 percent or about \$2,200 a year. The current inflation rate is over 7.5 percent, making for an effective pay cut.

While defying workers' demands for strike action, the Metal Trades Department has been organizing various stunts to let off steam that have absolutely no impact on the company's bottom line. These include "punch-out walkouts" where workers clock out together and gather at the end of their shifts. The unions also held a "community support rally" at the Portland shipyard on April 9.

The unions have no intention to launch a genuine struggle against the company. While the leadership claimed the second vote was to "gauge current sentiment among workers," it was really an attempt to see if the militant sentiment of port workers expressed in the January vote had been dissipated enough to call off a strike altogether. When workers continued to express strong sentiment for a strike, the unions returned to the bargaining table to repackage another concessionary deal with Vigor Marine.

Vigor Marine was founded in 1995 when owner Frank Foti purchased the ailing ship repair company Cascade General. Since then, Vigor has expanded and merged, and was eventually acquired by The Carlyle Group and Stellex Capital Management in 2019, forming part of Titan Acquisition Holdings. Vigor itself boasts \$624.6 million in revenue while Carlyle Group makes \$2 billion in revenue.

In 2018, Vigor Marine was cited for 16 health and

safety violations by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), totaling over \$370,000 in fines. Some of the violations included allowing workers to work on energized circuit boxes and not having an adequate hearing protection program for workers.

The April 9 rally was attended mostly by union representatives, who admitted that rank-and-file workers were not in attendance because they were on the job in the middle of back-to-back ship repairs for ships docked at the port. Shipbuilders are being forced to work 70-hour weeks to meet orders. Opposed to any struggle against forced overtime and seven-day workweeks, the unions simply said workers should be “fairly compensated.”

Carlyle Group is deeply integrated into the military-industrial complex and US intelligence network. Carlyle’s Real Assets segment advises 11 US and internationally focused real estate funds, two infrastructure funds, two power funds, an international energy fund and four Legacy Energy funds. Carlyle’s CEO, Kewsong Lee, is paid \$16 million a year and had an estimated net worth of at least \$130.55 million as of February 9, 2021.

Port workers, like workers everywhere, want to wage a real fight. But the unions have long been transformed into tools of corporate management. This is further demonstrated by the betrayal of the five-month strike by 300 Seattle-area concrete mixer drivers, whom the Teamsters ordered to return to work Monday without a new contract.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Vigor workers to build rank-and-file workplace committees to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the pro-company unions. These committees should outline a series of demands that workers need, including a 40 percent wage increase, full cost-of-living protections and the restoration of the eight-hour day. We urge workers to contact us for assistance in forming these committees, which will also fight to link up shipyard workers with broader sections of the working class to wage a common struggle.



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