

600 Kansas City-area construction workers near second week on strike for major wage increases

George Gallanis
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Last Tuesday, nearly 600 Kansas City-area construction workers went on strike to demand substantial wage increases after rejecting a contract proposal from the Builders Association, a construction trade association.

According to the International Union of Painter and Allied Trades (IUPAT) Local 2012, striking workers again overwhelmingly voted to reject an “interim agreement” on Friday. In addition to painters, the IUPAT includes tradespersons who work on glazing, drywall and flooring.

Workers would have received a raise of just 1 percent under the Builders Association’s first proposal, according to local press reports. With consumer prices having risen 8.5 percent in the 12 months ending in March, such a raise would in fact have meant a 7.5 percent cut in workers’ real income.

Speaking to ABC affiliate KMBC News, Renee Adams, a striking painter, said, “We’re not even getting a cost-of-living wage. It’s a slap in the face to us. We feel disrespected.”

As inflation eats away at the pay of workers across the world, the strike in Kansas City has emerged as part of a growing movement of the working class internationally for improved living conditions. Protests and demonstrations in Sri Lanka, Peru, Indonesia, Pakistan and elsewhere have exploded recently as workers fight against unbearable living costs.

Throughout the pandemic, construction workers have continued to work even as COVID-19 has ripped across communities and work sites. Construction workers in Texas were found to be five times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID, according to an October 2020 study in the medical journal *JAMA Network*

Open. In Colorado, construction accounted for the most COVID deaths of any industrial sector as of mid-2021, state Department of Health data showed.

The stark contrast between being dubbed “essential” workers and the insulting pay increases on offer has fueled anger among the strikers, as it has among other sections of workers who have struck over the last year, including teachers, John Deere workers, nurses, health care workers and others.

Speaking on the strike, Frank Carpenter, Business Manager of IUPAT Local 2012, told KMBC News, “You can’t just sit back and take it all the time. You’ve got to actually do something about it. This is the most peaceful way to do it.”

However, the IUPAT’s actions indicate that the union is seeking to isolate the strike and end it as soon as possible. On Sunday evening, IUPAT District Council 3 announced on its Facebook page that it would be ordering a “stand-down” Monday after supposed progress in negotiations, writing, “Contract Negotiations Committee is meeting Monday afternoon with management. Your pressure campaign is working. We are going to order a stand-down tomorrow. There will be NO STRIKE ACTIONS.”

Instead of seeking to mobilize the thousands of other construction workers in the Kansas City metro region behind the strike, the IUPAT has been appealing to federal mediators as supposedly “neutral” arbiters, while trotting out Democratic Party politicians, such as Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas, as “friends of labor.”

But the Democrats, no less than their Republican counterparts, are representatives of big business. Just last month, Mayor Lucas touted a data center to be

opened in the coming years by Meta, Facebook's parent company. Meta will receive up to \$1.8 billion in tax write-offs for the facility.

Speaking to reporters, Lucas made clear that the tax incentives were just an initial down payment, saying, "To our friends at Meta and anybody else in the business community watching: our help doesn't stop now. We were happy to vote in all the approvals. ... But the state of Missouri, the City of Kansas City—we're still here to work with you along the way."

The IUPAT is part of the AFL-CIO, an institution deeply integrated into the Democratic Party. The AFL-CIO, through its affiliated unions, has actively sought to prevent workers from winning substantial wage increases amid historic inflation. Just last month, the United Steelworkers forced through a national agreement past the opposition of oil and petrochemical workers, with USW President Tom Conway boasting that it was a "responsible contract" that does not add to "inflationary pressures."

In the construction industry, the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) rammed through a concessions agreement in Washington last October with inadequate wage increases, despite widespread opposition among carpenters. The workers had previously voted down four tentative agreements brought back by the NWCU. After the union felt compelled to authorize a strike, it did everything it could to limit its impact, calling out just 2,000 of 12,000 carpenters.

To win their demands for major improvements to wages and working conditions, striking construction workers must take the struggle into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees. Such committees will be able to democratically formulate demands based on the needs of all workers and provide a means to connect with workers throughout the region—including Ford and General Motors autoworkers—and more broadly in a struggle for higher wages and safe working conditions.



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