

With inflation raging, Pacific Northwest Vigor shipyard workers vote on another union-backed sellout

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On Thursday, the Metal Trades Council of the AFL-CIO announced a third tentative agreement for about 900 workers at Vigor Marine shipyards in the US states of Oregon and Washington. Voting will take place through April 28. While workers are struggling with record cost-of-living rises and 70-hour workweeks, the proposed contract will impose cuts to real wages while giving a green light to the company to maintain exploitative working conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls upon Vigor workers to vote “No” on the agreement, rejecting for the third time a contract that fails to offer any improvements to working conditions and living standards. A resounding rejection of the contract should be the first step in shipyard workers taking independent action, preparing for an immediate strike that could significantly disrupt the industry.

The latest agreement proposes only a modest increase from the last, with wage increases of \$1.25 on May 2, \$1.30 on December 1 and \$1.40 at the end of 2023. It also adjusted the bonus calculation, with \$5 for every hour worked between December 1 and April 10, with those who have sacrificed themselves for weeks of overtime getting a one-time payment of \$3,000. That formula would mean much smaller amounts for part-time workers.

Considering the astronomical cost of living in the Portland and Seattle metro areas, the proposed wage increases will do nothing to relieve the heavy economic burden on workers and their families. The average hourly wage for a full-time journeyman welder is listed as \$35 per hour, which would put the wage increases at 3.6 to 3.7 percent annually while inflation currently stands at 8.5 percent.

The previous contract expired at the end of November, and since then workers have overwhelmingly rejected two union-backed tentative agreements and authorized strike action. The first offer from Vigor proposed hourly raises of \$0.35, \$0.60 and \$0.75 during each year of the 3-year contract, along with a one-time \$1,500 ratification bonus. Workers rejected the offer in December, with 90 percent voting in favor of a strike. After three months of closed-door negotiations, at least two-thirds of workers rejected the second agreement in March that included a

\$2,000 ratification bonus with \$1.10, \$1.25 and \$1.40 respective hourly increases.

The wages at Vigor do not suffice to support a family let alone maintain a comfortable standard of living. Wages vary widely by occupation, full-time or part-time status, and skill level. The website *PayScale* reports that the typical laborer earns a wage of \$25 per hour for workers at the affiliated Vigor Industrial, which manufactures ships and military equipment.

The Living Wage Calculator by Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates that to support a minimum standard of living for a family of two adults and two children, an individual worker would need to earn at least \$43.99 per hour in Portland’s Multnomah County and \$41.35 in Seattle’s King County.

The sky-high cost of living in these West Coast metro areas has increasingly pushed workers far outside the city in search of affordable housing for their families, driving anywhere from 10 to 50 miles to and from work each day. Workers already spend significant chunks of their paychecks on fuel and auto costs, which are now becoming unbearable.

The economic impact of inflation on workers is made doubly worse by the long 70-hour, 7-day workweeks required to meet back-to-back repair projects on cruise and industrial ships. Workers report having little time to spend with their families and higher child care expenses.

Skilled trades workers also operate in very physically demanding and hazardous workplaces, including exposure to toxic chemicals which cause higher rates of respiratory illnesses and cancer. In 2018, Vigor Marine was cited for 16 health and safety violations by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and fined over \$370,000 in total. Like other industrial workers, those at Vigor were forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with many workers getting infected. To give a sense of the pandemic’s impact on the industry, an article earlier this year by *Bloomberg News* reported that in January alone roughly 1,700 West Coast dockworkers in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach tested positive for COVID-19.

While workers are forced to sacrifice their lives and well-

being, the corporate executives and their financial backers are doing better than ever. In 2017, Vigor celebrated its largest contract in company history, nearly \$1 billion to build the U.S. Army's next generation landing craft. It also recently took over the former home of Christensen Yachts to set up the all-aluminum fabrication facility, saying at the time it will invest millions in capital upgrades and equipment.

The Carlyle Group Inc., a notorious private equity firm that purchased Vigor Marine and Vigor Industrial in 2019, reported record financial earnings in 2021. On February 3, it reported that fourth-quarter distributable earnings increased almost fourfold thanks to a record level of asset sales from its private equity portfolio. Its distributable earnings rose to a record \$903 million in the fourth quarter, up from \$237 million the previous year.

Vigor and its financial overlords are deeply integrated into the military-industrial complex, salivating over the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine because of the immense profits to be made through military contracts. The last few years have demonstrated that the ruling class is willing to sacrifice anything for profits, including the lives of millions of workers in the pandemic and, with the prospect of war with Russia, the possible nuclear annihilation of the planet.

Thus they have no intention of willingly conceding to workers' demands, conditions which workers need to live. Their profits are derived from the brutal exploitation of the working class, which means jacking up consumer prices, demanding higher levels of productivity and suppressing wages.

Having already rejected the previous two contracts, Vigor workers have shown they are determined to fight back against declining living standards and dangerous working conditions. They are not fooled by the union's tactics, dragging out the closed-door negotiations and staging ridiculous "punch out" protests and bureaucrat-filled rallies, all while keeping workers on the job for back-to-back shifts to pump out profits for the shipyard.

If workers are to prevail, the direction of this struggle cannot remain in the hands of the union, which will do everything in its power to prevent any action that threatens corporate profits and their own cushy relations with management, to which their own salaries and investments are ultimately tied. To give an image of how far away the union bureaucrats are from the day-to-day struggles of workers they "represent," the AFL-CIO Metal Trades Department President Jimmy Hart took home a total of \$261,538 in 2019.

Vigor workers must take the fight into their own hands by fighting for an overwhelming "No" vote on this contract and organizing independent rank-and-file committees. In developing their own organizations, workers can prepare a strike for demands that truly meet their needs, including a 40 percent wage increase, cost-of-living adjustments, an end to forced overtime and the implementation of improvements to

job safety.

Vigor workers are in a powerful position to rally behind them broader sections of the working class, who are fighting against the same basic issues. This includes the roughly 1,000 other workers who are under the affiliated Vigor Industrial sector, who manufacture ships and military equipment.

In December, shipyard workers in Mississippi fought against multiple attempts by the United Steelworkers to carry out a four-year extension of their contract. Against the determination of workers to carry out a strike, the union eventually pushed through an agreement in February that contained a 11.75 percent wage increase over five years, which amounts to a significant pay cut due to inflation. A similar struggle was waged by shipbuilders in Newport News, Virginia, this February.

Currently, there are ongoing strikes by nurses at Stanford Hospital in California, graduate students at the University of Illinois Chicago, tens of thousands of Peruvian cargo carriers and other industrial workers and bus drivers in India, to name only a handful. As part of a global wave of mass protests, Sri Lankan workers and youth have been engaged in ongoing demonstrations demanding the overthrow of the current government, whose policies have led to widespread shortages of food and other goods.

The common thread between all these struggles is the rebellion of the working class against the growing social, economic and political crisis spawned by the capitalist profit system which has made life miserable for billions of people while enriching a tiny layer at the top.

The fight by Vigor workers is part of the unfolding global class struggle, but urgent action is needed to avoid this struggle being derailed by the unions. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to contact us for assistance in forming these rank-and-file committees which will link their struggles to workers in other industries and countries in order to wage a common struggle with the broader international working class.



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