

Sellout contract at Vigor Marine shipyards passes amid widespread opposition from workers

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We encourage Vigor Marine workers to contact us to share your thoughts about the contract, the impact of inflation and working conditions. We will do everything we can to assist the fight to build independent rank-and-file committees to overturn this rotten contract and prepare a strike.

On Thursday, the AFL-CIO Metal Trades Council announced ratification of a third tentative agreement covering 900 workers at Vigor Marine shipyards in Oregon and Washington. The latest vote came after Vigor workers had twice rejected union-backed contract proposals and authorized strikes, indicating overwhelming support for a fight for adequate wage increases and other improvements to safety, working hours and job security.

The main announcement from the Portland Metal Trades Council on Thursday night simply stated, “The tentative agreement passes. No strike.” Workers have not received any details about the final vote tally nor a breakdown by occupation or site. A comment beneath the Facebook announcement provided an unconfirmed tally of “564 yes and 242 no.” However, no official information has been provided by the union to workers.

The union kept workers in the dark throughout its closed-door negotiations with the company and did not provide the full contract language prior to vote. By all accounts, the contract voting process was hasty and anti-democratic, in line with the union’s aim of wearing down opposition over time and preventing a strike. Rank-and-file workers are well within their rights to demand a revote with adequate time for workers to review and discuss the material.

The just ratified contract includes insulting wage increases of only 3.6 to 3.7 percent annually, which are far below the current rate of inflation, which stands at 8.5 percent in the United States. This “pay raise” amounts to

a significant pay cut for workers, especially in the Portland and Seattle metro areas where the working class has been hit by skyrocketing housing costs, food and other living expenses.

One worker replied to the Metal Trades Council Facebook post, “So what you’re saying is, ya’ll represent the company and not us.”

Another worker at Vigor in Portland, who would like to go by “John” to protect his anonymity, explained his suspicions about the legitimacy of the vote on Saturday, telling the WSWs: “The last vote they released the numbers on the boilermaker page immediately. This is day two and crickets. ... I have asked about a vote of no confidence in our union leadership.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s a rigged election. I have no idea who is overseeing the vote. If they aren’t bought and paid for by the company as well.” John went on to say, “I have zero faith in this union. It’s a union in name only. It’s a bought and paid group of company shills. Hell, the president of all Boilermakers makes over \$400,000 a year.”

The privileged union bureaucrats live in a different world from the workers they claim to represent. Over the last 10 years, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers President Newton Jones has received annual compensation ranging from \$428,000 to over \$800,000, placing him in the top 5 or even top 1 percent of income earners in the US.

This social chasm between the bureaucracy and rank and file is only growing wider as inflation erodes workers’ already inadequate wages. “The fact of the matter is [that] Portland and Seattle are some of the most expensive cities in the United States to live these days,” John stated.

“Inflation is currently at 8.9 percent. We all know it’s

far higher than that. Considering the wording the government put out. It's up 8.9 percent from last year. Which was 4.7 percent." John talked about the pay raise in the contract, "This isn't a raise and shouldn't be thought of as such. It's keeping your current buying power with the money that you make now.

"No one is taking into account what is currently going on in our world economy and how it's going to massively affect us here. Two of the largest wheat and oil manufacturers are at war. Germany's version of Walmart [Aldi] has raised food prices 30 percent this month."

Expressing the widespread anti-war sentiments within the American working class, John warned, "NATO is quickly approaching a flash point with Russia which will drag us all into World War Three. ... We are in uncharted territory. The everything bubble is about to pop. We have never sanctioned a country with 5,000 nukes. That alone is unprecedented."

The US-NATO imperialist war drive against Russia, raising international tensions to new heights and threatening a nuclear war, is sending reverberations throughout the global capitalist economy. Raging inflation, food and fuel shortages, and the lack of critical agricultural supplies threatens to throw billions of poor and working class people into hunger and destitution. The last few years of pandemic have shown how the ruling class is willing to sacrifice workers' lives in the name of profits, and they will not stop even at the prospect of risking nuclear world war.

It is in these circumstances that the trade unions are playing a key function for the American ruling class. The escalating US military interventions abroad demand "labor peace" at home. As expressed in US President Biden's meeting with the North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU) of the AFL-CIO in early April, the Biden administration is depending upon the unions to suppress the class struggle and prevent strikes in the face of the development of militant opposition in the working class to declining living standards. This is the role being played by the unions at Vigor, which is owned by the private equity firm Carlyle Group and holds multibillion dollar military equipment contracts with the US Department of Defense.

The union bureaucracy is well rewarded for its services to the political establishment and corporate-financial oligarchy. In addition to the dues extracted from workers' pay, the unions receive material resources through various forms of union-management collaboration, as well as the oversight of health care and pension funds. These pro-

corporate syndicates, as the Vigor worker John remarked earlier, are "unions in name only."

If the struggle of Vigor shipyard remains in the hands of the union bureaucracy, it will be strangled and betrayed. The sole concern of the union is to prevent any interruption in the flow of corporate profits that is the source of its lavish salaries and expense accounts. This is a fact rooted in the objective mutual relationship between the unions, corporations and the Democratic Party, a process which cannot be undone with internal reform efforts or the election of new officials.

Vigor workers have shown that they are prepared to fight, but new forms of organization are required to ensure that they have a fighting strategy and can draw upon the strength of the united working class. Workers must assert their own control over the direction of their struggle, building rank-and-file committees to unite workers independently of the unions and pro-corporate political parties. Through these committees, rank-and-file workers can raise demands that will truly meet their needs, such as a 40 percent wage increase, cost-of-living adjustments, full-time job security and worker oversight of improvements to job safety, overtime and productivity.

Rank-and-file committees will establish lines of communication with broader sections of the working class, including West Coast dockworkers, nurses, teachers and oil workers. Around the world, the working class is engaged in mass protests and demonstrations in rebellion against the unbearable social and economic conditions, including in Sri Lanka and Spain. These struggles must be connected into a mass movement of the working class, directly challenging the profit-based capitalist order and all the organizations which defend it.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Vigor workers to contact us for assistance in forming 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 and win their demands for the protection of workers' lives and livelihoods.



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