

Lumber workers in Washington and Oregon continue strike for wage increases, benefits

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On Tuesday, around 1,200 Weyerhaeuser lumber workers began a strike at facilities in Washington and Oregon. The workers authorized a strike on September 2, rejecting the company's latest contract offer that proposed effective pay cuts, cuts to vacation time, employees paying premiums for health insurance and provided no improvement in retirement benefits. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers District W24 (IAMAW) had been in negotiations with the company since before the contract expiration date on May 31.

In Washington state, strikers are picketing at company facilities in Longview, Aberdeen, Raymond Mill, and Olympia. In Oregon, pickets are taking place at Coos Bay, Springfield and Cottage Grove. The striking workers are log yard scalers and equipment operators, sawmill workers, mechanical loggers, and log truck drivers, including a wide variety of maintenance, mechanical, and electrical workers.

In a public Facebook post, one worker explained, "This is the first time in 36 years Weyerhaeuser employees have gone on strike. This company has gone from a family-owned company to a greedy corporation who treat their employees like they are nothing more than a number. Warehouse drivers make less than many other companies in this community. This is NOT fair!!! Especially when they post their record-breaking profits!!!"

"Everyone is making signs and getting ready to picket," a worker who asked to remain anonymous told the *Chinook Observer* late Monday night. "I can tell you at midnight the employees will be walking out, meeting at a location and [will] be holding down the lines. Tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow night until we get what we want."

Weyerhaeuser, among the largest wood products

manufacturer in the US, recorded full-year net earnings in 2021 of \$2.6 billion as reported on January 28, 2022, and delivered "total cash return to shareholders of more than \$2 billion based on 2021 results," according to the company's website. Weyerhaeuser reported that its "2021 financial performance was the strongest on record," with a roughly 69 percent increase in net earnings from 2020 to 2021, according to a January press release.

The workers overwhelmingly rejected the company's latest contract proposal. This is the first walkout since the seven-week-long strike occurring in 1986. That strike ended with 7,500 workers reluctantly voting to approve a sellout contract that imposed wage and benefits cuts, after one of the two unions split the strike and accepted the company offer. A week later, the second, smaller union followed suit.

Many workers have spoken out about the sharp deterioration in their working conditions, wages and living standards over the last four decades. As one retired worker, who had worked for Weyerhaeuser for 44 years, wrote on Facebook, "When I started it was amazing and in the end, it was worthless for caring for their employees! The toll on my body has been tremendous and safety is in the eye of the beholder!"

Executives from the Seattle-based company with total assets of more than \$16 billion said they are concerned the walkout will "impact multiple Wood Products and Timberlands sites."

In a statement, Denise Merle, senior vice president and chief administration officer, said, "After we presented our final offer, IAM workers at multiple sites went on strike late last night. While we are very disappointed in their decision to walk out, we are committed to supporting our employees and negotiating in good faith with union representatives."

Brandon Bryant, president of IAMAW District W24, said in a press statement, “We had the largest turn out of our membership for this contract vote that anyone can recall, with over 80% of our membership voting. The offer from the company was overwhelmingly rejected and our associated vote to strike was soundly passed. Issues for rejection were, substandard general wage increases, cuts to vacation, employee paying for premiums and no other improvements to healthcare, and no improvement on retirement.”

The Weyerhaeuser strike is part of a broad resurgence of working-class struggle throughout the US and internationally. Teachers, nurses, auto, port and transit workers are fighting for safe working conditions, adequate time off, improved benefits and steep wage increases to overcome record-breaking inflation and decades of deteriorating conditions.

Railroad workers across the United States have been engaged in a bitter conflict against railroad management, the Biden administration and the trade unions over these same fundamental issues. Rather than unite the working class and mobilize a powerful movement, the unions have worked to isolate and suppress their struggle. This includes the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the national organization to which the Weyerhaeuser workers belong, which attempted to push through a sellout contract and then extended the “cooling off” period to September 29 after workers overwhelmingly rejected the deal.

The critical question confronting workers in every industry is the development of a network of independent rank-and-file committees, through which workers can oppose the backroom deals of the unions, coordinate with one another and build a powerful movement to assert their democratic demands against the corporations.

We encourage all Weyerhaeuser workers to contact us today to share your thoughts and experiences.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact