

Laborers' union shuts down strike by 600 Portland city workers ahead of ratification vote

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Over 600 public sector workers in Portland, Oregon, were told to report to work Sunday by Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 483 ahead of a contract ratification vote, ending a strike that began Thursday. The workers struck to demand safe working conditions and higher pay to keep up with inflation. Around 95 percent of workers had voted to authorize the strike in a vote held in mid-October.

Local 483 includes a wide range of workers in the Portland Bureau of Transportation, the Bureau of Environmental Services and Portland Parks and Recreation. These workers comprise approximately 10 percent of the city's total workforce and carry out essential functions for the city's infrastructure, such as managing wastewater, clearing roads and cleaning public parks. Portland Democratic Mayor Ted Wheeler declared a state of emergency in the lead up to the strike, in part due to the significant impact the strike would have on daily operations. Wheeler prepared to hire scabs and applied pressure to workers to accept concessions.

The strike was called off when Laborers' Local 483-Portland City Laborers (PCL) and the City of Portland came to a tentative agreement (TA) after 12 hours of mediation that concluded with a joint statement released at 12:30 a.m. Sunday morning. The statement said that the strike would end at 1 a.m. despite neither the city council nor the rank-and-file workers approving the TA.

Workers are highly concerned about safety, which has not been addressed by the city. Parks and Recreation workers are responsible for maintaining the grounds and cleaning debris. With the rise in homelessness and addiction, there are needles, sharps,

human feces and other hazardous materials, with the compounding risks of exposure to COVID-19. With the intensified social crisis, workers also report dealing with assault and other dangerous situations with the public.

The workers had been forced to continue working without a contract for 10 months. The last contract began in 2017 and expired in June 2021, at which point the union leadership and city government agreed to a one-year extension without a membership vote. According to the *Northwest Labor Press*, "That means workers haven't gotten cost-of-living adjustments in over a year, and those [previous raises] were 1.6%."

Thus, despite the increased pressures and hazards workers face on the job, workers have experienced a staggering decline in their real wages over the last two years alone. The most recent data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics calculated inflation rates around 6.5 percent in December, with the previous quarters' rates ranging from 7 to over 8 percent.

Prior to the strike, the city's final offer included annual 1 percent wage increases, limited COLA increases, and an immediate 12 percent raise. The 12 percent raise included a 6 percent retroactive increase to July, a 5 percent retroactive cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase and a 1 percent annual increase, hardly making up for the last two years of soaring costs of living.

The union demanded an immediate 10 percent wage increase with 3.5 percent wage increases in the first two years of the four-year contract. It also called for the removal of 5 percent caps on the annual COLA rates. The union also asked for "substantially increased shift differential," new and improved premium pay, 100

percent employer-paid health care premiums, and 2.5 percent matching for defined contributions to 403(b) retirement savings. The city government has steadfastly refused to remove COLA caps or agree to the wage increases proposed by the union.

Limited information released on Sunday reveals that the TA is entirely in line with the city's program of austerity and is far below the workers' demands. Oregon Public Broadcasting reported: "The new four-year contract would include 3% annual raise for the first year, retroactive to July 2022, in addition to a cost-of-living adjustment capped at 5%. The second year includes another 5% cost-of-living adjustment, then there will be payment adjustments based on the federal consumer price index for the remaining two years."

After isolating the workers from the rest of the city workforce, the laborers' union has now called off the strike before the workers have had a chance to cast their ballots on the deal. Laborers' union representatives made clear from the beginning that the strike would continue "until a tentative agreement is reached", not until workers have decided for themselves when their demands have been met. Members are now being rushed into a vote that began on Sunday, with Local 483 reporting that it will take several days to tally the results.

The meager raises in the TA reflect the demands of the city rather than the needs of workers. The premature ending of the strike by LIUNA is an insult to workers who are struggling to work and survive in the high cost environment of the city of Portland. In addition to the inadequate wage proposals, there have been no concrete steps to ensure the safety of workers on the job, such as increased staffing and additional protective equipment. James O'Laughlen of the Oregon Laborers Local 483 only reported that the contract includes "improvements to working conditions and equity matters."

Workers have every right to reject this agreement and continue their strike until all their demands are met. While there is clearly a willingness to fight, winning their demands means challenging where society's resources are being directed. There are ample resources in Portland, home of Nike co-founder and multi-billionaire Phil Knight, to meet workers demands for improved work conditions, affordable housing for all and comprehensive mental health and social services for the homeless.

However, under capitalism, this wealth is being funneled into the US-NATO war drive in Ukraine, Wall Street investors, the private real estate industry and corporate executives. To end conditions of poverty and exploitation, workers necessarily have to fight against that social order and the politicians who defend it.

To succeed, workers must form their own democratic organizations, rank-and-file committees run by workers themselves, to assert their demands and build broader solidarity among all city workers and broader sections of the working class who face the same basic issues. There would be great support for the city workers among the broader working class in Portland and across the West Coast region. We encourage workers to contact the WSWS to share your thoughts on the agreement and get assistance in developing a committee at your workplace.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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