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...COVID-19 is impacting construction

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president Dan Drinkward says his company is deploying staff in blue vests to serve as “social distancing coaches” on construction sites to encourage safe practices. Hoffman is also limiting capacity in personnel lifts and elevators, limiting the use of shared tools and sanitizing them between uses, dramatically increasing handwashing stations and toilet facilities, and staggering start times and lunch times to limit the number of workers who come on or off the job or eat lunch together at any one time. Large stand-up shift meetings and safety meetings are being eliminated; instead, superintendents issue the orders of the day to smaller groups of foremen, and they relay that to workers they supervise.

At Intel, where Hoffman is the general contractor, spots at lunch tables are taped to keep workers from sitting shoulder to shoulder. To relieve crowding on shuttle buses, construction workers are being directed to use Intel’s closer-in parking lots, which were made vacant when white collar employees were told to work from home.

Some project owners determined that more drastic action was called for. Adidas shut down its headquarters expansion project for the time being. So did Facebook with its data center project in Prineville, and the company offered \$4,000 payment to construction workers who were sent home.

To be sure, some building trades union members are also staying home, and individual workers and in some cases whole crews are walking off the job. And some of those who remain are there because they need the money, or worry about the consequences.

“It can be tough for a rank-and-file member to make that call,” Culver says. “Because the job might finish while you’re off. And for the next job, the contractor might assemble a crew from those who were there at the end of the last job, and there might not be a job for you to return to.”

Elsewhere in the country, some unions have pulled their members off jobs altogether. In Massachusetts and across New England, the Painters and Carpenters unions directed their combined 17,000 members to stop working as of April 6, ex-

WHAT’S YOUR EXPERIENCE?

Should construction work continue? What steps are you taking to keep safe? Share your experience with us at editor@nwlaborpress.org

cept for those building health care facilities to address the COVID-19 crisis. And the Massachusetts Building Trades Council voted unanimously to call on the governor to suspend all non-emergency construction.

In Oregon, the state building trades council has focused on raising safety awareness on the job. It created a joint COVID-19 task force made up of several dozen union and employer representatives who meet online twice a week. A subcommittee of the task force is conducting scheduled visits to construction work sites. Accompanied by an OSHA inspector, delegations of five to seven task force members started visiting sites this week to verify that contractors and workers are abiding by safety practices that are recommended to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“Our members’ wellbeing is our number one priority,” Oregon Building Trades Executive

Secretary Robert Camarillo told the *Labor Press*. “Work is our second priority. We’re not willing to sacrifice anybody.”

Operating Engineers Local 701 Business Manager Jim Anderson said some of his members are taking voluntary layoff to stay safe or to take care of kids who are home because of school and daycare closures, but Local 701’s out-of-work list isn’t bigger than usual at this time of year. And members who do take a layoff tend to have banked hours that allow them to maintain union-provided health insurance. Employer health contributions for all hours over 120 worked in a month go into a reserve, and members can bank up to six months of health benefits. Meanwhile, Local 701’s hall is closed to visitors, regular union meetings are cancelled, and the training center classes are cancelled for now, but reps are as busy as ever, focused on fostering safe practices like social distancing.

“As long as it’s a safe working environment, then let’s keep working,” Anderson said. “It all boils down to communication with the members and the contractors.”

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SUPPORTING THOSE STILL WORKING

Thank you to all the trades workers that are out in the field doing essential functions to keep things going during COVID-19. We are here to support you.

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