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Plasterers uncover wage theft

By Don McIntosh

Unpaid overtime, skipped rest breaks, illegal charges to workers for housing, and violation of the requirement to pay prevailing wage: All that tumbled out when union representatives from the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons International Association (OPCMIA) talked to employees of nonunion plaster subcontractor ODP Systems who worked on a luxury apartment construction project in Eugene last year. What happened next is the latest example of building trades unions standing up for workers in general—not only their members—when they police abuses in the construction industry. OPCMIA representatives gathered evidence and turned it over to the federal government for enforcement.

On April 22, after an investigation by the U.S. Department of Labor, general contractor Essex General Construction paid \$88,000 to settle charges of wage theft for five workers who



Thanks to a federally guaranteed loan (and the labor of undocumented workers who were cheated by their employer) Eugene residents can enjoy “unrivaled luxury” in 600-sq-foot 1BR apartments that rent for \$1,625 a month.

worked on the project from March to December 2019, and deducted the amount from final payments owed to ODP.

ODP—based in Sherwood and named for its owner Oscar D. Palacios—got the Eugene job after underbidding union-signatory bidder Western Partitions Inc. by

at least 20% on the million-dollar plus subcontract, according to Western Partitions plaster department manager Mitch Rask. Starting in March 2019, ODP directed a crew of 9 to 12 workers to apply interior plaster and exterior

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AFL-CIO sues OSHA

A federal lawsuit seeks to force OSHA to issue rules to protect workers from COVID-19.

They asked nicely. They petitioned. Now they're suing. COVID-19 has caused more deaths among workers in a shorter time than any other health emergency in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) 50-year existence. Health care workers, meat packers, transit workers, grocery workers, and others are at heightened risk. Yet OSHA hasn't required employers to take any specific action to protect them, instead issuing non-binding “voluntary” guidance.

As early as March 6, the AFL-CIO and 23 national unions asked OSHA for an emergency temporary rule to protect workers from COVID-19. Crickets. Exasperated by April 28, federation President Rich Trumka wrote to U.S. La-

bor Secretary Eugene Scalia, saying OSHA had failed to meet its obligation to protect workers and calling the government's response “delinquent, delayed, disorganized, chaotic and totally inadequate.”

Scalia wrote back, saying a new rule isn't necessary because existing rules and guidance are more valuable and allow employers flexibility.

On May 18, the AFL-CIO filed suit in U.S. Court of Appeals seeking a court order that OSHA issue an emergency temporary rule within 30 days.

Unions have asked OSHA for that before, such as during the 2005 avian flu pandemic. In 2009, unions petitioned OSHA seeking a permanent standard governing occupational exposure to infectious diseases. Obama's OSHA initiated rule-making but never completed it, and the Trump Administration abandoned it after taking office in 2017.

Unions react as nation explodes in protest

Witness video of the slow-motion murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police May 25 provoked immediate horrified reactions worldwide, and led to days of protests and riots in dozens of American cities.

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, half a dozen local unions issued statements calling for justice for George Floyd. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers called on the school district to cut ties with the police department, and asked members to wear black on June 1. The head of the Minneapolis police union fanned the flames, however, calling Floyd a violent criminal and promising the union would defend the four officers fired for his death, including the three who held him down and the fourth who asphyxiated him.

In New York City, when police loaded commandeered city buses with handcuffed protesters facing mass arrest, bus drivers refused to transport them, with the backing of their union,



Transport Workers Local 100.

“TWU Local 100 bus operators do not work for the NYPD,” the union said in a May 29 statement. “We transport the working families of NYC. All TWU Operators should refuse to transport arrested protesters.”

As protests spread, many national unions issued statements, and so did the national AFL-CIO

labor federation.

“Racism plays an insidious role in the daily lives of all working people of color,” declared national AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka May 28. “This is a labor issue because it is a workplace issue. It is a community issue, and unions are the community.”

Trumka issued a longer statement June 1 after some protesters

trashed the AFL-CIO headquarters lobby in Washington, D.C.: “I watched the video of George Floyd pleading for his life under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer. No person of conscience can hear Floyd's cries for help and not understand that something is deeply wrong in America. ... We must and will continue to fight for reforms in

policing and to address issues of racial and economic inequality.

“We categorically reject those on the fringes who are engaging in violence and destroying property. Attacks like the one on the AFL-CIO headquarters are senseless, disgraceful and only play into the hands of those who have oppressed workers of color for generations and detract from the peaceful, passionate protesters who are rightly bringing issues of racism to the forefront.

“But in the end, the labor movement is not a building. We are a living collection of working people who will never stop fighting for economic, social and racial justice. We are united unequivocally against the forces of hate who seek to divide this nation for their own personal and political gain at our expense.

“We will clean up the glass, sweep away the ashes and keep doing our part to bring a better day out of this hour of darkness and despair.”