

...STRIKE

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struction forecast, and that last year's biggest-ever \$2.62 an hour raise should be enough for three years. But Local 10 views that Year 1 increase as a long overdue first-stage catchup raise after 40 years of falling behind other painters union locals, other trades, and even inflation itself.

For the commercial and residential painters employed by SPCO contractors, the big raise amounted to a 10.9% increase. But for three decades before that, Oldham says, increases averaged less than 2% a year. In recession years, there were sometimes no raises at all, and there were even two years when hourly wages fell because of health insurance cost increases. Union painters were gradually pinched by inflation as their real-life purchasing power fell by more than 10%.

The squeeze has left commercial painters the lowest-paid among the local building trades union craftworkers by more than \$5 an hour.

In fact, Local 10's long-term wage slippage has been so severe that—though their union benefits are far superior—the union wage is often insufficient to entice non-union painters to jump to the union side of the industry.

Yet straight through the pandemic, construction has continued to boom, members are at full employment, and Local 10 sometimes struggles to supply enough labor to contractors.

Calling employers' bluff



about concerns of continued economic uncertainty, Local 10 asked SPCO to divulge all projects planned through March 31, 2022. But SPCO members, including Williamsen and Bleid, mostly declined to provide the requested information. On May 18, Local 10 filed unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board against Williamsen and Bleid and two other SPCO members—W.E. Given and Siegner & Company—saying their refusal to provide the information is an illegal failure to bargain in good faith. Technically, that was the grounds for the May 21 strike, and why the picket signs said “Unfair Labor Practice.”

Outside Madison High School, picketers stayed until 9 a.m., but because all nonstriking union workers honored the picket line and left the job, work never started for the day, to the chagrin of general contractor Fortis Construction.

But the strike wasn't a one-off. It was a shot across the bow, a warm-up exercise amid a week-

long mail-in strike vote by Local 10 members who work under the SPCO contract. On May 24, ballots were counted: 95% said they're prepared to strike.

The same day, delegates at the monthly meeting of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, AFL-CIO, approved unanimously a resolution put forward by the stagehands union IATSE Local 28—to stand in solidarity with Local 10 members.

On May 28, painters struck Williamsen and Bleid again, this time at a six-story downtown apartment project run by Hoffman Construction, a project workers say was far behind schedule. Many contractors at the Southwest 17th and Taylor site were non-union, but the job slowed to a virtual halt anyway.

This time, solidarity from just two union members in Operating Engineers Local 701 played a key role shutting down the job. Union carpenters, laborers and cement masons honored the painters' surprise picket line, but some non-union workers were willing to cross. Strikers say non-union bricklayers crossed picket lines, only to come out a little while later when they made a discovery: Without operating engineers to run the crane or the lift, they'd be faced with carrying brick loads up multiple stories. After a lengthy powwow on a nearby corner, a large crew of non-union bricklayers left at 7:30 a.m. And one of the operating engineers returned to the picket line, to bring strikers cases of bottled water.

FIRST STRIKE: To make the most of the element of surprise, even Painters Local 10 members, like those at Madison High School left, don't know until they arrive on the job that they'll be striking that day.

“Seeing everybody respect the picket lines showed that people believe in unions,” Oldham told the *Labor Press*. “It showed that the saying, ‘An injury to one is an injury to all,’ still rings true. Our members took comfort in knowing that union members from all crafts believe in that.”

After the first strike, Local 10 invited SPCO to meet again May 27, but the employer group declined. The two sides next meet on June 15 with the help of a federal mediator. Oldham hopes employers will sweeten their offer, but says so far they seem to have dug in at 25 cents. If they stick to that, the Local 10 strike committee is planning a series of rolling one-day strikes, without warning to employers, as members build confidence toward a full shutdown of all paint contractors.

They're calling it “Summer of Chaos 2021,” and the slogan is already appearing on stickers and T-shirts Local 10 is giving out to members, alongside an image of the ominous-looking breathing apparatus painters must sometimes use.

For other building trades workers, a season of strikes could offer a chance to flex the muscle of solidarity ... and some unplanned three-day weekends to enjoy the summer weather.

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