

POLICY NOTE

Key Findings:

1. A strike planned by a truck-drivers union left thousands of vacationing families stuck in traffic over Labor Day weekend.
2. In August, the peak construction month of a record construction boom, members of Teamsters Local 174 abandoned concrete trucks and left construction equipment running and unattended.
3. The surprise walk-out delayed re-surfacing work on Interstate 90 at Snoqualmie Pass, ensuring a traffic nightmare on one of the busiest weekend of the year.
4. The Teamsters make over \$30 an hour on average, and union executives had already rejected a 12 percent pay raise.
5. Union executives profit from strikes because each percentage increase in pay results in more dues money going to union bank accounts.
6. Ironically, taxpayers ended up paying the union for the inconvenience of sitting in traffic, as strikes and delays increase road project costs.

How a union strike left vacationing families stuck in Labor Day traffic

By Erin Shannon, Director, Center for Small Business & Labor Reform
September 2017

Introduction

On Labor Day weekend, as we honored the achievements of American workers and their contribution to building the greatest nation on earth, families around the state planned their holiday celebrations. Very often those plans included traveling for one last vacation before summer ended.

If those Labor Day plans included crossing over Snoqualmie Pass, however, Washington state Department of Transportation (DOT) noted that traffic was even slower than usual due to delayed road construction.

The uncompleted project that left thousands of drivers stuck in traffic was the rebuilding of bridge decks just west of the pass. The project was supposed to be completed well before the Labor Day weekend, to make all travel lanes available to vacationing families.

Out of concern for the traveling public, DOT officials did not want to add construction slow-downs to the most heavily travelled pass on one of the most heavily travelled weekends of the year.

Instead, a decision by union executives to call a strike of union concrete truck drivers caused exactly the traffic snarl officials had tried to avoid. DOT says the delay caused by the strike is to blame for the unfinished road project and the resulting Labor Day traffic nightmare.

Union rejected 12 percent pay raise

The concrete truck drivers strike held construction projects around King County hostage while union executives at Teamsters Local 174 demanded higher pay and benefits. The average wage for a concrete truck driver was \$31 per hour, and the offered 12 percent pay and benefit increase over three years wasn't enough for the union (they accused the companies of not bargaining in good faith). So the union rejected mediation efforts and called for a strike.

DOT confirmed that, despite great construction weather, the unexpected strike by concrete delivery-truck drivers put the project behind schedule.

Strike during peak construction months

The timing of the union's surprise strike incurred maximum damage. According to *The Seattle Times*, on August 11th the concrete truck drivers started their morning as usual and then walked away from trucks filled with ready-mix, perishable concrete and abandoned construction jobs in the middle of concrete pours, causing "untold financial damages."



Erin Shannon is the Director of the Center for Small Business & Labor Reform at Washington Policy Center, a nonprofit research organization with offices in Tri-Cities, Spokane, Seattle, and Olympia.

The reward for what one concrete company characterized as the union’s “deplorable action” was a quick concession of higher pay and benefits. After just a week of striking during the busy summer construction season and stalling projects, the union executive bragged they had negotiated “record-setting wage increases,” higher pension contributions, full maintenance of healthcare benefits and most importantly of all language protecting union work in King County “from being undercut by drivers brought in from outlying areas at lower wage rates.”

Unions profit from strikes and by blocking competition

Presumably those drivers from outlying areas would gladly work for \$31 per hour, otherwise there would be no need for a provision prohibiting hiring them. But competition is an anathema to unions, who prefer to operate from a monopoly position.

Of course, the taxpayers who fund public projects like the bridge repairs on Snoqualmie Pass are on the hook to pay for that lack of competition. So union workers win by getting higher wages, more benefits, and protection from those willing to work for lower wages. The union bosses win by collecting even more union dues to add to their coffers. Taxpayers lose because they pay for all of it in the long run.

Taxpayers end up paying the union to sit in traffic

It is ironic that as families around the state tried to celebrate Labor Day and the contributions of the labor movement, many people spent hours of the holiday weekend stuck in gridlocked traffic. The inconvenience imposed on the public was the direct result of the strong-arm tactics of a labor union that decided increasing \$31-per-hour wages by 12 percent was not enough, and demanded unreasonable and unfair job protections that stymie competition.

It is also ironic that their tax dollars will ultimately fund the reward given to the union for inconveniencing them (and thousands of other holiday weekend drivers) on one of the busiest driving weekends of the year. On the bright side, the public had plenty of time while sitting in traffic to contemplate whether the contributions of today’s labor unions are worth celebrating.

Washington Policy Center is an independent research organization in Washington state.

Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.

Published by
Washington Policy Center
© 2017

washingtonpolicy.org
206-937-9691