

US dockworkers rally in Los Angeles

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More than 2,000 longshore workers, their families and supporters rallied in the Los Angeles area on Labor Day, September 2, to protest the Bush administration's threats against their jobs and democratic rights. Similar rallies took place in Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. The Los Angeles workers are represented by Local 13 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the largest of the ILWU locals on the West Coast.

Contract talks broke off between West Coast dockworkers and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) the previous evening, opening the door to a possible strike or slowdown by workers in the industry. The breakdown in negotiations took place under conditions in which the Bush administration has openly lined up with management against the ILWU.

US Labor Department officials have warned the union that any work action will be met with the declaration of a national emergency under the Taft-Hartley Act, which entails the imposition of an 80-day "cooling-off" period, and the possible use of Navy personnel or National Guard troops to operate the docks.

Claiming that a work action will jeopardize "national security" and the "war on terrorism," Bush officials have also threatened to break up the union's West Coast bargaining unit and impose port-by-port contract negotiations. This would amount to the destruction of the ILWU at the hands of the federal government.

Union negotiators charge the PMA is no longer interested in bargaining, since it has Bush on its side.

The union contract expired July 1. It had been extended on a day-by-day basis since then. No strike can take place for at least two weeks, since ILWU rules call for a mail ballot by the 10,500 workers represented by the union. The employers association has threatened to lock out the workers if a slowdown takes place.

The biggest issue separating the two sides is the

question of productivity improvements that would eliminate 1,000 clerks, reducing the number of ILWU workers to 9,500 from the current 10,500 at 29 West Coast ports. In addition to the productivity issue, the two sides are far apart on other issues, including wages, medical benefits and pensions.

At the Labor Day rally in the Los Angeles suburb of Wilmington, the main speakers were AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, ILWU President James Espinoza and Jesse Jackson. Trumka sought to outflank the PMA by indulging in flag-waving rhetoric. He embraced the Bush administration's belligerent "anti-terror" policy, labeling the PMA as unpatriotic and a "security risk" because some of the shipping companies are foreign-owned and conduct business with Iran, Iraq and Libya.

Trumka appealed to Bush on the grounds that the ILWU members were "patriots." He complained that the White House had chosen the wrong side in the contract dispute.

As president of the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) in the 1980s and early 1990s, Trumka made a specialty of demagogic speeches, laced with American chauvinism, combined with a policy of capitulation before the mine owners and the government. A series of bitter struggles against union-busting and concessions was betrayed by the UMWA, resulting in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the decimation of the union in former UMWA strongholds. Union membership declined by nearly a half under Trumka's presidency.

At the dockers' rally, Trumka said the ILWU members could count on the support of 13 million AFL-CIO members, without indicating what form that support would take. He admonished ILWU members to "keep your gun powder dry," but made no concrete proposals as to how the struggle could be won.

Jesse Jackson appealed for support for the

Democratic Party against Bush.

ILWU President Espinoza declared, “We’re not going to sit back and watch as they outsource and downsize like they do in every other country. We’re holding our ground right here.” He was silent as to how the union intended to fight the shipping companies and their allies in the Bush administration.

Espinoza gave a very general and brief overview of the state of negotiations, and appeared to be sending a message to PMA negotiators of a possible deal that would meet management’s demands for job cuts, as long as the ILWU bureaucracy was granted a role in the process. “We recognized the need for technological change in 1960, with the condition that the jobs that remain be ILWU jobs,” he declared.

The nationalist rhetoric of Trumka, Jackson and Espinoza have been coupled with the use of Democratic politicians such as Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn and Governor Gary Locke of Washington State to appeal to Bush to stay out of the negotiations, while the ILWU retreats on the jobs issue.

In contrast to the declamations of the bureaucrats and politicians, the mood among the workers at the rally was more somber. Many of the ILWU members are older workers for whom the memory of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike is still fresh.

Richie Vigil, a former member of the Teamsters and now a teacher for special education children, said, “We are getting chewed, we are losing all of our jobs. Consolidated Freightways stopped operating today, laid off 15,000 workers, and the union will do nothing. It stopped fighting for jobs in 1988 when, instead of picketing the closure of the DART trucking company, the local advised workers to find other jobs. In 1990 and 1994, when Union Pacific and Southern Pacific replaced their union workers with nonunion ones, the union just stood by.”

Gordon Chessman, an ILWU member in the audience, remarked that Jackson had made similar remarks in the 1980s, at rallies to prevent the closure of Todd Shipyards. “All the best intentions are up against so much money. I was present when Jesse Jackson spoke at the Todd Shipyard when it was closed down, and he said the same thing. Jackson certainly does not speak for me.”

Joe, an ILWU member with 25 years seniority, said, “The ILWU itself accepts that one thousand clerks will

lose their jobs. That is already more or less settled, but it is not just an issue of computers. Human beings have to work them—people who know the operation of the port.

“The PMA agenda is to outsource work and to kill us. We built these ports and got them to where they are now. The PMA now says, ‘We don’t need you anymore.’ It knows that it can count on President Bush to support its agenda. PMA President Joseph Miniaci wants that to be his legacy: ‘Look at what I did. I destroyed the ILWU.’”

Some workers expressed illusions in the Democratic Party. Richie Vigil said, “This union is pretty strong; it will be hard to crush these guys, because they are more political than the Teamsters. They have political contacts.”

Joe commented, “I hope that this issue can be settled without a strike. There are important politicians that have come out in our support to help us stop Bush and the PMA.”

Younger workers were more combative. A young woman who is a part-time worker and ILWU member said, “Bush stole the election and engineered this phony war so that he can pass the laws that he wanted in the first place, so that the rich can profit. Now we have to fight with everything we have. If we strike, they may intervene. If they do that, there may be bloodshed.”



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