

US shippers lock out dockworkers on West Coast

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The renewed shutdown of all ports on the West Coast of the United States by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) signifies an increasingly aggressive stance on the part of the shipping companies in their ongoing dispute with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) over the terms of a new contract. After bringing dockworkers back on the job for one day after a 36-hour lockout, the shippers refused to call anyone back to work Monday morning.

This latest development demonstrates that the talks now under way between the two parties have no other purpose than the negotiation of surrender on the part of the union—a surrender that the ILWU bureaucracy is currently preparing.

The PMA claims that the lockout that began on Friday, September 27 was in response to a work “slowdown” instituted by the ILWU after an impasse was reached over the conditions under which computerized data technology will be introduced on the docks.

Earlier this week the union issued a directive instructing the longshoremen to refuse extended work hours and to strictly observe all health and safety regulations, in effect calling on the dockers to conduct a “work-to-rule”. The ILWU insists that no “slowdown” was ordered and that the backlog of shipping containers jamming the docks is the result of a massive increase in the volume of goods flowing into the ports and an industry-wide speedup.

Other than denying the existence of any job action and the publication of a brief statement on their web site reporting the lockout, the union has been silent over the PMA’s recent actions. The only statements coming from the ILWU bureaucracy have been to insist that the union is ready to return to the negotiating table.

This must be understood as a message to the longshoremen that the ILWU leadership has no intention of engaging in a substantial fight against the PMA in defense of the dockers’ jobs.

The PMA companies are responding to a worldwide glut in container shipping that has induced aggressive competition and desperate cost-cutting measures. To maintain profitability, they are demanding increased introduction of laborsaving technology, such as the use of scanners to move cargo, and the right to have data entry performed away from the docks at the cheapest possible wages.

The union bureaucracy has already agreed to accept the loss of 1,000 longshore jobs as a result of the implementation of these technologies. Prior to the lockout, the union continued to insist that all of the remaining ILWU positions be guaranteed and that any jobs created as a result of the new technology fall under union jurisdiction. However, the ILWU’s toothless response to the PMA’s most recent aggression signifies that the trade union leadership is contemplating further concessions.

The use of nonunion labor by the shipping companies is already a significant phenomenon, as some corporations in the PMA have set up container storage facilities off the docks and under the control of subsidiary companies not subject to ILWU contracts.

The PMA is adamant on having the power to make further reductions in the workforce and the right to move the new technology jobs out of the ILWU hiring hall. The hiring-hall system currently in place gives the union control over the daily distribution of duties among the longshoremen. A key demand in the formation of the union in 1934, it ended the humiliating “shape-ups” endured by the dockworkers, which included blatant favoritism by the bosses and the practice of forcing workers to bribe company officials to ensure themselves steady work. In the name of efficiency, the PMA member companies are seeking to have a stable gang system hired by them and coupled to telephone banks that would bring in more workers as needed.

To defend their rights and the future of their jobs, longshoremen must adopt an independent approach to the question of the implementation of new technologies, one opposed to the positions of both the PMA and the ILWU bureaucracy. Technological changes that increase productivity are inevitable. To the extent that they reduce the stress, strain and dangers of dock work, they are inherently progressive.

However, these technological developments must be harnessed to benefit the living standards and working conditions of the longshoremen and the working class as a whole, not the profit margins of the shipping companies. Instead of opposing the introduction of new technology, the longshoremen should insist that technological improvements be under the full control of the workers themselves. The impact of these changes should be a reduction in working hours with no loss in pay and safer and improved working conditions.

Such demands, however, would place the longshoremen on a headlong collision course with the PMA and the Bush administration. This is impermissible to the ILWU leadership, which is seeking to avoid at all costs a major struggle on the part of a workforce with vast economic significance for world trade, the US economy and the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism.”

The ILWU represents 10,500 dockworkers at 29 major Pacific ports. The West Coast docks have been expanding at an average rate of 5 percent a year. The Los Angeles port alone is the biggest in the US by volume as well as one of the world’s largest. Longshore workers are the gatekeepers for \$320 billion in finished and intermediate goods that move through the ports every year.

The current situation facing the rank and file of the ILWU is an expression of the fact that these longshoremen are at the center of

worldwide transformations in labor relations that have been developing for some time and are necessary to sustain a globalized economy under capitalism. Today's international markets and production networks depend on the expansion of reliable and inexpensive transportation systems. In order to achieve this, railroad, shipping and trucking companies all over the world have engaged in two decades of union-busting, privatizations, speedup and the use of nonunion labor. This crusade began in the US with the smashing of the air traffic controllers union (PATCO) in 1981 under the Reagan administration.

In these processes, big business has found an ally in the trade union bureaucracies, which have systematically worked to contain opposition to these assaults by isolating strikes and diverting the growing anger among workers to the defense of national industries and xenophobic attacks against foreign labor. The ILWU bureaucracy is no exception.

Over the last few decades it has profited as an instrument of management, organizing production and imposing discipline on the docks. The trade union leadership has a long history of combining radical verbiage with collaboration with the PMA.

Since 1961, it has signed agreements that have led to the systematic destruction of jobs. By 1983, membership was down to 6,500 from 16,000 in 1965. The current level of employment—10,500—is only the result of the latest expansion of Pacific Rim trade. Although the number of jobs on the docks has increased, the union has presided over a dramatic decline in safety conditions. This year alone, five longshoremen have died as a result of accidents.

The ILWU bureaucracy is organically incapable of leading a struggle against the PMA.

Workers must consider the course of the negotiations with management since July. When the PMA demanded changes in productivity, the ILWU readily gave in, declaring that it did not oppose a plan that would destroy 1,000 jobs. When the Bush administration threatened to use the National Guard and naval forces to get the ports moving again in the event of a strike, the ILWU leaders went hat-in-hand to Democratic Party politicians who are in fundamental agreement, despite certain tactical differences, with the Republicans over the need to prosecute the “war on terrorism” and roll back the social safety net.

When the White House labeled the longshoremen “unpatriotic” for exercising their legal right to engage in collective bargaining, top union officials paraded their nationalist colors—accusing the PMA of being unpatriotic and negligent in the war on terrorism. Now the PMA institutes a lockout and throws workers out of their jobs for 36 hours with no pay, and the ILWU leaders have no response.

A recent declaration from the union's negotiating committee urges longshore workers to expedite military cargo through the ports. Thus, while preaching class solidarity, the ILWU bureaucracy is actively supporting the predatory aims of the US government abroad, claiming that the longshoremen are true patriots because they will help transport arms and munitions to be used against the working people in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Moreover, the rapid growth of US militarism is intimately connected to a long developing and now accelerating attack on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class in the United States. With the economic position of the ruling elite in America threatened by a global economic decline and the growth of competition from abroad, Washington is seeking to dig itself out of this situation by establishing geopolitical control over the world's

most important economic resource—oil—through the extension of its military power.

These very same economic pressures—exacerbated by the widening fallout of financial scandals, the impact of Bush's massive tax cut for the rich, and the burgeoning costs of Washington's military adventures—are forcing the ruling class to further rein in the demands of the working class. This process is aided by beating the war drums in order to stifle political opposition, attack civil liberties and whip up patriotic fervor.

In order for the dockworkers to effectively fight the PMA and the attacks of the Bush administration a new leadership and a new strategy are needed. Longshore workers must mobilize and launch a strike that makes a direct appeal to rank-and-file dockers throughout the US and in countries around the globe as well as to workers in all related industries, over and above the heads of the union bureaucracies.

Practical measures are urgently required. It is necessary for dockers to take control of the fight out of the hands of the ILWU bureaucracy, which has demonstrated its unwillingness to wage a struggle. Mass meetings must be called in every port for the purpose of electing rank-and-file committees to organize and coordinate a strike to shut down all West Coast docks. Appeals to boycott the unloading of scab ships must be issued to dockworkers on the East and Gulf coasts of the United States, to Canadian and Mexican dockworkers and to dockworkers across the Pacific Rim.

In the best traditions of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike that marked the birth of the ILWU, outreach committees are needed to contact workers across North America for their active support against the inevitable counterattacks of the employers and the Bush administration.

The longshoremen cannot trust the guarantees of support issued by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) and held up by the ILWU as an assurance of international solidarity in the event of a strike. On numerous occasions the ITWF has promised such support and every time it has resulted in little more than trotting union officials around the globe in speaking campaigns. Over the course of the past decade, dockworkers in Australia, India, Liverpool, Charleston, South Carolina and other ports have been systematically abandoned by the union bureaucracies constituting the ITWF.

Militant industrial action can only succeed as part of a new political strategy for the working class as a whole. The conflict on the docks has demonstrated once again that working people have no representation under the present system. By virtue of its ownership and control of society's resources, a privileged elite monopolizes political power. Thus, longshoremen are threatened with the National Guard if they dare strike, but the employers' lockout receives the tacit support of both Democrats and Republicans.

The one force capable of redressing this situation is the working class, which needs to build a political party of its own, committed to social equality and the restructuring of society so that new technology and the wealth produced by working people is used to benefit the vast majority.



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