

Big business presses for Bush to intervene against California dockworkers

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Hundreds of container ships are jamming the waters of ports on the West Coast of the United States as the lockout of longshoremen by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) continues into its sixth day. According to some estimates, the shutdown of the docks is costing the US economy as much as \$1 billion a day.

The effect of the lockout is widespread. In Fremont, California, a plant run jointly by Toyota and GM has already closed due to a lack of auto parts needed to keep the assembly lines going. Grape growers on the Pacific seaboard of the US are reporting a massive glut in their warehouses, with fruit unable to reach the Asian markets. Meanwhile, retailers across the country are warning that unless the shipping containers stranded at the ports get moving soon, they will not be prepared for the Christmas shopping season that begins in November. The effect could be to lose the boost in sales they desperately need to lift sagging profit margins.

A group calling itself the West Coast Waterfront Coalition, representing retailers like Wal-Mart and Target as well as manufacturing companies like Toyota and Panasonic, wrote a letter to Bush demanding immediate action. Organizations representing trucking companies and agribusiness have issued similar appeals to the White House for federal union-busting.

With thousands of tons of consumer merchandise, produce, manufacturing parts and other cargo unable to reach their destinations, it is clear that the PMA and the Bush administration are willing to pay a very high price in order to break the resistance of the longshoremen to attacks on their jobs and working conditions.

Negotiations between the shipping companies and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which have been ongoing since July when the

previous contract expired, reached an impasse last week over how new technology will be instituted in the ports. While the ILWU leadership has said that it is willing to accept the loss of 1,000 longshore jobs in the process of bringing the West Coast facilities up to modern standards of computerization, the PMA is insistent on even further work-rule concessions. Also at stake in the contract talks are health benefits and pension funds.

The PMA lockout of 10,500 workers began on the morning of Friday, September 27 and was lifted two days later, only to be re-imposed later that evening. The shipping companies said they closed down the ports in response to an ILWU-organized slowdown on the docks. The ILWU bureaucracy insists that it issued no orders for a slowdown, although it has instructed its members to strictly abide by all health and safety regulations.

Tensions between the union and management increased on Tuesday of this week when representatives for the PMA came into a mediation session flanked by armed security guards. In response, union officials walked out.

This provocative action was in keeping with the hostile environment that has surrounded the talks since August, when Washington publicly threw its weight behind the PMA, threatening to bring in the National Guard in the event that the union called a strike.

The PMA claimed that it brought along armed guards due to death threats against its chief negotiator, James Miniace. Union leaders, however, said the action recalled the techniques of violence and intimidation used against the longshoremen during their attempts to unionize in the 1930s.

“This shows how they approach negotiations, hiding behind the government and armed thugs,” said ILWU President James Spinosa. “PMA’s lockout is holding a

gun to the head of the American economy, and now they move to aim real guns at us.”

Having walked out of the negotiations on Tuesday, the ILWU has since reentered talks with the PMA under the oversight of a federal mediator, Peter J. Hurtgen. The ILWU accepted Hurtgen as a go-between in the contract dispute, despite the fact that he formerly worked for Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, the law firm that represents the PMA.

From the beginning of the PMA’s decision to lock the longshoremen out of work, the union has maintained that it is ready and eager to return to the bargaining table. On September 30, Spinosa stated, “The ILWU continues to put forward the best effort and is willing to meet, as we have been meeting, even though we find ourselves in an undesirable position, we will continue to make every effort to get ourselves a contract in this set of bargaining.”

The union is also making every effort to affirm its patriotic loyalty, instructing its membership to continue loading all ships carrying military equipment and materiel, regardless of the lockout. On Thursday of this week, the ILWU’s web site proudly announced that “after three days of efforts, the ILWU and Maersk [the owner of a military cargo vessel] were able to convince the PMA to allow longshore workers to get the ship on the way.”

Despite the trade union bureaucracy’s attempt to ensure that the PMA’s actions have no impact on Washington’s war efforts, it is widely anticipated that if the labor dispute drags on, the White House will declare a national emergency and invoke the Taft-Hartley Act. This would impose an 80-day cooling-off period on the two parties and force the longshoremen back to work in the interim.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat from California, has already called on the federal government to intervene in this manner. “With our nation in the economic doldrums and at the brink of war, we cannot afford to have this dispute cause further damage to our economy,” said Feinstein.

The ILWU has refused to comment on the senator’s position, which is particularly awkward for them given that the union leadership has continually told its membership that the Democrats would defend them in Washington against the Bush administration’s threats to intercede.

For their part, the AFL-CIO has remained relatively quiet about the shipping companies’ actions. On September 30, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney issued a tepid statement condemning the PMA for the lockout and insisting that “these (longshoremen) are ready and willing to work.” The trade union bureaucracy has done nothing to mobilize workers in related industries in defense of the ILWU membership. Similarly, the UAW, whose own workers have been laid off on the West Coast because of the lockout’s blocking the shipment of auto parts, has said nothing about the PMA’s actions.



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