

US: West Coast shippers call for government sanctions against dockworkers

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On October 23, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) filed a report with the Justice Department accusing the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) of organizing a “concerted, systematic slowdown” at 29 West Coast ports.

The filing initiates a legal attack on the union under the terms of a Taft-Hartley injunction imposed by the Bush administration earlier this month. The White House invoked the anti-union Taft-Hartley law to end a ten-day lockout, ordering a resumption of work under an eighty-day “cooling-off period.” The injunction prohibits workers from engaging in strikes, slowdowns or any other work actions.

On October 14, only five days after the longshore workers had returned to work, PMA head Joseph Miniace reported a 22 percent drop in productivity, blaming it on the union. He then declared his intention to file charges against the union with the Justice Department.

The PMA’s action underscores what is at stake in this conflict. Bush’s invocation of Taft-Hartley was part of an ongoing conspiracy between the White House and the shippers to cripple the union and destroy gains won by longshore workers over decades of struggle.

Throughout the current round of contract negotiations—the old agreement expired on July 1, 2002—the shippers have played a highly provocative role, making union-busting demands, refusing to negotiate in good faith, and sabotaging any possibility of a compromise. The ILWU leadership, for its part, has offered massive concessions—including the loss of 1,000 union jobs—and continually retreated in the face of management’s hard-line stance.

Having created chaos at West Coast ports by locking out the ILWU, the PMA, together with the CEOs of major corporations and banks, lobbied Bush to impose Taft-Hartley, so that the full weight of the federal government would be brought to bear against the workers.

Bush’s Justice Department is now in a position to file suit in the federal courts asking for massive fines against the ILWU, and even the jailing of union officials.

The PMA alleges that productivity in the ports has fallen by 34 percent in Oakland, 29 percent in Portland, 27 percent in Seattle and 9 percent in Los Angeles/Long Beach. It accuses the ILWU of sabotaging normal operations either by failing to

provide a sufficient number of skilled workers or delaying their dispatch, and by misplacing paperwork and containers.

In fact, it is the PMA that is responsible for the situation that now exists on the docks. It chooses to ignore the gigantic bottlenecks resulting from its ten-day lockout, including a shortage of dock space, truck chassis and railroad cars. These conditions, plus the fact that many casual workers have not been given full-time status by the PMA, are the real causes of the productivity decline.

With good reason, the head of ILWU Local 13 at Los Angeles/Long Beach complained, “The PMA is not acting in good faith and staffing the docks...they are manufacturing a crisis.”

The PMA’s contract demands include proposals to eliminate jobs, reduce medical benefits and make fundamental changes to the hiring hall system, one of the most important achievements of the 1934 San Francisco general strike. The main issues in the conflict have centered on the introduction of new technologies. The ILWU has already capitulated on the elimination of 1,000 jobs as a result of new computerized methods, but the PMA is making a further demand—one with direct union-busting implications. It is insisting that new jobs created as a result of the introduction of certain new technologies be non-union.

On the hiring hall question, the PMA is demanding the establishment of permanent work gangs, contracted directly by the employers themselves, a condition that would give employers the right to hire and fire as they see fit. Under the current system, established as a result of the 1934 strike, a union-controlled pool of workers is sent out to work each day.

Last June Tom Ridge, the White House director of homeland security, and attorneys from the Labor Department informed the ILWU that the government considered industrial action by West Coast longshore workers a national security issue. The Bush administration threatened to use the US military to keep the ports open in the event of an ILWU strike.

Conspiring with the government are major industrial and merchandising firms. On October 4, officials of more than a dozen trade groups as well as executives from Boeing, the retail chain Best Buy and other firms met with Bush administration officials in Washington demanding the imposition of Taft-Hartley. Counting on the support of the government and big

business, the PMA persisted in bargaining in bad faith, repeatedly rejecting conciliatory offers from the ILWU.

The White House stance is fully consistent with the virulent hostility to unions and any form of working class organization, no matter limited, of the most right-wing sections of the US corporate elite and the Republican Party. It is of a piece with Bush's demand that the 170,000 federal employees to be transferred into the new Department of Homeland Security lose both their civil service protection and union representation. In both cases, Bush is using "national security" and the "war on terrorism" as the pretext for an onslaught on workers' democratic rights.

National security was also raised by the federal judge in San Francisco who on October 16 upheld the White House invocation of Taft-Hartley and formally imposed the 80-day cooling-off period. In his ruling, he stated: "When our nation is at war with international terrorists and when our national defense must be fully prepared, the sustained closure of West Coast ports would imperil the national safety."

This creates a legal precedent that suits the White House's needs. It suggests that the government be allowed an open-ended no-strike order on any section of the labor movement in the name of a "war on terrorism" of undetermined duration.

The PMA's latest move fully confirms the warning contained in an October 10 *World Socialist Web Site* article on the White House intervention into the docks dispute. The article said:

"The PMA had been pressing for White House intervention under the Taft-Hartley law in order to put the full power of the state behind its offensive against the dockworkers... The act severely punishes any defiance on the part of the workers, with measures that could result in the bankruptcy of the ILWU itself. Not only can the government impose fines on the union for engaging in a slowdown or strike, but the PMA is also empowered to sue to be compensated monetarily for any financial loss caused by the industrial action." ["Bush invokes anti-union Taft-Hartley law against West Coast longshoremen," October 10, 2002 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/oct2002/ilwu-o10.shtml>].

The ILWU leadership, through its own combination of cowardice, treachery and political prostration, has played directly into the hands of the Bush administration and the PMA. It has refused to prepare for strike action, or seek to mobilize other sections of workers in defense of the dockworkers and against the White House's union-busting intervention.

Instead, it has repeatedly professed its patriotic support for the government's "war on terrorism," thereby lining up behind the Bush administration's policies of militarism and global conquest.

At the same time, the ILWU bureaucracy, under attack from the Bush White House, looks to the Democrats for support. This alliance with the second party of US big business has once again proven its worthlessness, with the Democratic Party throwing its support behind Bush's intervention. Dianne

Feinstein, the senior Democratic senator from California, publicly joined the corporate elite in calling on Bush to impose the Taft-Hartley law. The AFL-CIO, consistent with its record of isolating and betraying struggles against government/corporate union-busting, has done nothing and is prepared to do nothing to defend the longshoremen.

A jurisdictional conflict between the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the ILWU reveals the real priorities of the AFL-CIO bureaucrats. The IAM has made it clear it is prepared to order its members to cross ILWU picket lines and scab. At one point during the PMA lockout, IAM workers in Los Angeles attempted to cross the ILWU picket line to go to work.

An article in the October 16 edition of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Bush administration, at the urging of shipping companies, is preparing new measures to prevent the closure of the ports after the 80-day cooling-off period expires. The article states that "federal officials are starting to move forward with regulations and possibly new legislation designed to prevent future crippling disputes..." In other words, new laws to strip longshore and other maritime workers of the right to strike.

These developments underscore the fact that the longshore struggle cannot be won except through a broad mobilization of the working class, based on a new political strategy. The ILWU and AFL-CIO leadership are preparing yet another betrayal of the working class. They oppose any defiance of or struggle against government union-busting because such a struggle would immediately expose the reactionary role of the Democratic Party and pose the need for a break with both parties of American capitalism.

Rank-and-file dockworkers are obliged to take the leadership of their battle out of the hands of the ILWU officials, and organize a fight for mass actions, including demonstrations and sympathy strikes, by workers across the country to demand the withdrawal of Taft-Hartley. This must be combined with the building of a new political party of the working class, based on a socialist program that defends the interests of working people rather than corporate profit.



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