

US longshore officials cave in to West Coast shippers' anti-union demands

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The leadership of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) last week agreed to the main concessionary demands put forward by West Coast shipping companies in the protracted negotiations for a new contract.

While other contract issues remain to be settled, an agreement was reached between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) on the introduction of labor-saving technology. The deal, announced by the director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service on November 1, will mean the destruction of some 1,000 jobs and further attacks on dockworkers' working conditions and living standards.

The technology agreement suggests that the two sides will announce a contract package in the coming days. Any such agreement must go to the rank and file for a ratification vote.

Having already secured an accord on health care provisions, the parties are scheduled to begin discussions on the question of pension benefits on November 13.

The deal reached on Friday resolves, in the PMA's favor, the terms under which new computerized technologies will be introduced on the docks. These computer-based techniques track the movement of shipping containers from the beginning of their trip to their final destination, employing bar codes and scanners to collect data, thereby moving cargo through the ports at much faster speeds. Although the ILWU leaders had already consented to the elimination of hundreds of union jobs, they had insisted that new jobs created by the introduction of the computer technology remain under union jurisdiction.

The ILWU negotiators have now surrendered on this key issue, giving up union representation for newly created clerical positions. Nonunion personnel will now

do these so-called "planning" jobs. In addition, the union dropped a demand for maintaining certain minimum manning levels for some operations.

For months the union leadership had been assuring longshore workers that it would not give in on the technology issue. In an attempt to avert or minimize a conflict with the rank and file over this reversal, the bureaucracy is demanding that some of the revenues from the new technology be set aside for improvements in pensions, including an early retirement option.

This is a calculated and cynical move to curry support for the deal from older workers—the most senior and highest-paid section of longshoremen, many of whom are close to retirement—in essence, urging them to place their individual self-interest ahead of class solidarity and the interests of dockworkers as a whole. It will create a two-tiered labor force in which older workers, whose jobs will gradually disappear through retirement, retain the benefits of union-negotiated pensions, while a new layer of younger workers is brought on board without many of the conditions that longshoremen fought for over many decades.

The consequences of the agreement go far beyond the initial loss of jobs and introduction of nonunion clerks. The increasing use of nonunion workers will weaken the traditional ability of the union to intervene in what up to now have been routine matters, such as health and safety and the assignment of jobs through the hiring hall.

ILWU workers have faced the direct collusion of the Bush administration with the shippers. Early in the negotiations, Bush officials told the ILWU that the administration was prepared to order troops onto the docks in the event of a strike or work action. The PMA utilized the de facto support of the federal government to assume a provocative posture in the negotiations,

demanding massive concessions and, in general, making sure that the talks dragged on without a resolution.

Finally, on September 29, the PMA imposed a lockout, which served as the pretext for the White House to intervene under the anti-union provisions of the Taft-Hartley law. In early October, Bush invoked Taft-Hartley with the full agreement of the shippers and after consulting with other sections of big business. Under a federal court injunction ending the lockout, the union and longshore workers were ordered to resume full work schedules without any slowdowns or work actions. The White House intervention placed the full weight of the federal government behind the demands of the shippers, with the threat of financial and criminal sanctions against the ILWU.

In mid-October the PMA initiated legal action for the imposition of such sanctions, formally complaining to the Justice Department that the union was conducting a slowdown and accusing it of being in “noncompliance” with Taft-Hartley.

Ultimately, the ILWU leadership capitulated to the PMA because to wage a struggle would have entailed a direct challenge to the Bush administration. This would have immediately exposed the fraud of supposed Democratic “support” for the longshoremen, and it would have required a genuine struggle to mobilize the working class nationally and internationally behind the West Coast dock workers.

In this betrayal, the AFL-CIO has played a central role. Once again, as in scores of previous struggles over the past two decades, the national union federation made sure that an embattled section of workers remained isolated, while it worked to broker a sellout deal. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka played a direct role in the most recent talks between the ILWU and the PMA.



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