

European-wide dock workers strike against port deregulation

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A demonstration of up to 10,000 dockers in Strasbourg, France on January 16 culminated in a violent clash with the police. The port workers were marching on the European Parliament to protest against the Port Package II bill that will deregulate ports in the European Union and lead to a severe attack on jobs, working conditions and living standards.

Police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the demonstrators, who threw firecrackers and hurled stones at the parliament building, breaking some 100 square metres of window glass. Delegations from all over Europe were in attendance. Apart from large contingents from France and Belgium, 1,700 Spanish dockers were on the streets of Strasbourg as well as port workers from Germany, Poland and Great Britain.

The protest, called by the European Federation of Transport Workers in order to put pressure on members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to vote against the bill, was backed by a massively supported strike that hit many European countries and brought ports to a standstill. The demonstration and the strikes in the different countries were supported by both Socialist Party and Communist Party-dominated unions.

In France, the Autonomous Port of Marseilles was totally paralysed with some 10 ships held up on the quayside. The Atlantic sea ports of Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Rouen, Brest and Saint-Nazaire were totally or largely at a standstill. The entire workforce of over 2,000 dockers launched a 48-hour strike in France's second largest port, Le Havre. In the northern port of Dunkirk there was a partial stoppage. Six hundred dockers in the French Indian Ocean island of Réunion struck in unity with their European counterparts.

In Spain, the Socialist Party aligned UGT (General Labour Union) and the Communist Party-backed CC.OO (Workers' Commissions) mobilised for the protests. The spokesman of the UGT reported that in 28 ports the strike

was virtually 100 percent solid. Loading and unloading operations stopped in the port of Barcelona and Tarragona, Spain's main grain import port.

In Portugal, the strike was widespread though union leader Joao Alves told the press that the leadership had arranged for a skeleton service for safety purposes and that Leixoes port in Oporto would remain open because of a threat of cargos being diverted to other ports.

In Belgium, 2,000 workers struck in Antwerp, Europe's second busiest port, which was at a standstill, and a large delegation travelled to the Strasbourg demonstration.

In Holland, the ports of Rotterdam, Europe's biggest, and Amsterdam were on strike.

In Greece, the merchant marine ministry reported that all port workers in the biggest port Piraeus, as well as those of Thessaloniki in the north and the Cretian port of Heraklion, were on a 24-hour strike.

In Germany, 4,500 dockers had struck on January 11. Hamburg was hit in the movement of opposition to Port Package II.

In Sweden, 1,500 dockers held a four-hour strike.

In Denmark, 1,300 dockers struck at Copenhagen.

The proposed legislation is the latest initiative in an ongoing drive of European big business to open up EU ports to the unbridled workings of the capitalist market on behalf of the transnational corporations. Jorg Wessels, a Hamburg docker, told the French *Libération* December 16, "The industrial ports are one of the last bastions of Europe where trade unionists still put up a fight. The shipowners don't care about employment or safety, they just want to coin in the money."

The first Port Package bill, endorsed by the European Council of Ministers, proposed the opening up of port services (pilotage, tugging, docking, loading and unloading) to competition. A Europe-wide strike of dockers on March 10, opposition from local and national businesses established in the different ports and some

disquiet in the political establishments at the social explosions that might be provoked, led the European Parliament to vote down the bill on November 20, 2003. It was rejected by a narrow margin of 20 members against the wishes of both the Council of Ministers and the Transport Commission.

The current proposals in Port Package II are a modified version of the first bill. The first version gave the shipowners the right to provide their own pilots and to use their own crew members to carry out the loading and unloading of ships. The current draft would restrict the right of ships' crews to handle cargo on land by excluding non-EU routes. The commission claimed, in reformulating the proposals, that opening up the market will help "bring much more business to the ports" and that "this will lead to the enhancement of employment in the ports."

MEP Georg Jarzembarski of the Christian Democrats, the largest group in the European Parliament, who is steering the bill through Strasbourg, said the new rules would "open up the books" of public authorities and counter state aid to ports and thus prevent unfair competition between them."

The dockers correctly see this as a plan to replace them by cheap, unregulated labour and by this method destroy working conditions and job security. An Antwerp dockers' web site warns: "Theoretically, the European Commission can withdraw its proposals. But for the commission it's a key issue which is entirely bound up with the Lisbon strategy decided in 2000, in other words, the cornerstone of European economic policy"—a policy based on the removal of all constraints on big business and profit-making within EU member states.

The site continues: "In the ports, too, absolute economic liberalism and competition must prevail in order to achieve the Lisbon programme, that is, to be economically stronger than the United States, by 2010, via the dismantling of working conditions.

"In Belgium, the Major Law of 1972 stipulates that only recognised trained dockers can carry out dock tasks ... wages and working conditions are fixed by collective agreements valid for all dockers ... almost everywhere [in Europe] the ILO (International Labour Organisation) treaty is in force: each country must keep a register of all recognised dockers.... Port Package will put paid to all that."

The development of a Europe-wide movement against the big-business agenda of the EU is entirely to be welcomed. It follows on from the rejection last year of the

proposed European Constitution in referenda in France and the Netherlands, a "no" vote that was directed in particular against the stipulation that the EU should become "an internal market where competition is free and undistorted" and "a highly competitive social market economy."

However, as with the official "no" campaign last year, the perspectives for the January 16 protest, announced in its January 13 bulletin by the European Transport Workers Federation, which represents 2.5 million transport workers in 39 European countries, are limited to an appeal to Strasbourg to preserve existing national economic regulation.

This only pits low-paid workers from outside the EU and poorer workers from within the EU against those with better conditions. Many workers from Eastern Europe are already being used as a replacement workforce and can be mobilised to scab and break strikes as was done last month in the Irish ferries dispute against reflagging and the use of crews from central and eastern Europe working for half the wages of their Irish counterparts. The trade union SIPTU in the end reached an agreement with Irish Ferries that sacrificed hundreds of its members' jobs and accepted two different pay rates.

The policy of the port unions that allows a division between Western European dockworkers and those from the Eastern European states and Asia will have the same disastrous consequences. What is needed is a perspective uniting all workers against the free-market offensive of the multinationals on a socialist programme. This means building a movement based on socialist internationalism and the planned organisation of the economic resources of society for the satisfaction of need rather than profit within a United Socialist States of Europe.



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