

US dockworkers' union holds eight-hour work stoppage to protest Iraq war

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The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) carried out an eight-hour work stoppage at West Coast ports on May 1 to demand an end to the war in Iraq.

The work action halted activity at 29 ports from San Diego, California to Washington State. According to both the ILWU and the employers' organization, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), 25,000 dockworkers represented by the union did not report to work for the first shift on Thursday, shutting down the country's principal gateway for cargo container traffic from the Far East. In the course of a typical work shift, some 10,000 containers are loaded and unloaded from ships docked at West Coast ports.

Under the slogan, "No Peace, No Work," the "work holiday" was called on the traditional day of international workers' solidarity as a demonstration of opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A resolution passed by the union in February called for an end to the occupation of Iraq and for the troops to be brought home immediately.

The ILWU initially cast the work stoppage as an annual membership meeting, which is allowed under the union's contract with the PMA, but which is normally held during the night shift. It gave the employers' association advance notice of the action, but the PMA objected, calling it an illegal violation of the contract. The dispute went to an arbitrator, who ruled in favor of the PMA and ordered that union members report to work.

That the action was nevertheless carried out is a reflection, above all, of the widespread antiwar sentiment among rank-and-file dockworkers. ILWU President Bob McEllrath, while sending a message of support to a rally held Thursday in San Francisco, the headquarters city of the West Coast union, sought to

distance the international leadership from the decision to proceed with the work action. He was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying the walkout was not ordered by the union leadership, but was the result of a "democratic decision" of the rank and file. Union officials also gave assurances that the one-shift stoppage would not seriously affect overall port operations.

In San Francisco, dockworkers and several hundred antiwar protesters assembled at the ILWU local hall and marched along the Embarcadero for a noon rally at Justin Herman Plaza. The union's drill team led the march, and ILWU banners called for an end to the war.

Speakers at the rally included antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan and film actor Danny Glover. The main speaker was Cynthia McKinney, the former Democratic congresswoman from Georgia. Barbara Lee, Democratic congresswoman from Oakland, California, was invited to attend, but instead sent a message of support that was read to the rally by an aid.

Sheehan, who is running for Congress from San Francisco as an independent against Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, denounced the war and called for a movement to be built so that "our grandchildren will not have to fight and die in a war like the one in which [her son] Casey died."

Jack Heyman, executive board member of ILWU Local 10 in San Francisco, said that longshore members who were Vietnam War veterans played a key role in getting the resolution passed in February to hold the work holiday.

Other speakers addressed the radical traditions of the San Francisco labor movement, recalling the names of Harry Bridges, former leader of the ILWU, and Paul Robeson, persecuted member of the Communist Party. Speakers referred to longshore actions opposing

apartheid in South Africa and opposition to the first Gulf War.

During the rally a message was read from the General Port Workers Union in Iraq, stating that two Iraqi ports would be shut down in solidarity with the West Coast actions.

As the first major job action against the war, Thursday's work stoppage can only be welcomed by all those opposed to the war in Iraq and to US militarism. It provided a demonstration, however limited, of the immense industrial power that can be exerted by the working class in opposition to the predatory policies of the American ruling elite around the world.

However, the political perspective advanced at the rally offered no means for actually bringing an end to the war. On the contrary, the organizers and union officials promoted the very policy of channeling popular antiwar sentiment behind the Democratic Party that has led all efforts to end the war into a blind alley.

The contradiction between the official demand of the walkout—the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq—and the ILWU's political perspective is expressed in the union's endorsement of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. The senator from Illinois, along with his opponent Hillary Clinton, has expressly rejected calls for the full and immediate withdrawal of US troops, and instead pledged to maintain a substantial US military presence in Iraq indefinitely, while expanding the US military intervention in Afghanistan.

In his message to the rally, ILWU President McEllrath sought to portray the job action as an expression of American patriotism, declaring, "Longshore workers are standing down on the job and standing up for America. We're supporting the troops and telling politicians in Washington that it's time to end the war in Iraq."



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