

Wildcat strikes shut down Washington docks for one day

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Wildcat strikes shut down ports in Seattle, Tacoma, and Anacortes, Washington on Thursday. The actions came at the same time as a protest in Longview, Washington against a newly built grain terminal run by the company EGT, which, backed by the federal government, is seeking to cut labor costs by bringing in outside workers.

Thousands of workers throughout the US Pacific Northwest were involved in Thursday's solidarity actions, which were not called by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Some of these workers joined the hundreds in Longview who stormed the grain terminal run by EGT, allegedly dumping some grain cargo off of a train inside the facility.

On Wednesday, in Vancouver, Washington, workers had attempted to block the same train from proceeding toward the terminal. Workers were confronted by a heavy presence of police, decked in riot gear and employing truncheons and tear gas. Nineteen workers were arrested in the protests.

These actions follow a long-running dispute between the ILWU and EGT, a joint venture between Bunge Ltd and Itochu Corporation. EGT had sought to hire non-union workers to operate the new facility and has now employed a contractor using labor from another union, General Construction and Operating Engineers Local 701.

Apart from the rivalry between the unions over dues—a principal concern of the union officials involved in the dispute—the conflict takes place against the backdrop of a determined attack by shipping companies and terminal operators against longshoremen. EGT is seeking to establish the ability to hire non-ILWU workers on the West Coast docks for the first time in 80 years.

During its earlier negotiations with the ILWU, EGT had sought contractual conditions that would have forced workers to accept 12-hour shifts with no overtime, along with other concessions. The conflict at EGT is also seen as a test case in a campaign to cut jobs and push through concessions in contract discussions between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association in 2014.

The federal government, through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), has intervened aggressively on the side of EGT, filing a court case backing the company and seeking to criminalize any organized opposition to its business operations.

The conflict between EGT and the longshoremen has been building over the past several months, as EGT prepares to open the \$200 million terminal in the spring. In January, EGT filed a lawsuit before US District Court Judge Robert Leighton against the Port of Longview. The company is insisting that it is not bound by contractual provisions restricting employment at the dock to workers in the ILWU.

In the summer, EGT moved to hire non-union workers (a total of 50 will ultimately work at the facility), saying that it would save \$1 million a year by doing so. Then in July, following a series of protests, it announced that it was using a sub-contractor employing the workers from the GCOE, based in Portland. EGT also broke off all negotiations with the ILWU.

Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), the principal freight railroad company transporting grain to the port, announced in July that it was suspending operations indefinitely after one of its trains was blocked by workers. The protests this week erupted after workers found out that another train was heading to the EGT terminal.

US District Court Judge Leighton, siding with EGT

and the NLRB, has issued a series of injunctions prohibiting efforts to block grain shipments. The most recent ruling, announced on Thursday, granted a permanent injunction prohibiting workers from blocking rail lines and impeding business in any way. The NLRB had sought to ban picketing outright, which the judge declined to do.

"The regard for the law is absent here," Leighton declared. "Somebody is going to be hurt seriously," he added ominously.

The injunctions against picketing are part of a pending case filed by the NLRB accusing the ILWU of unfair labor practices. If the complaint is upheld in a hearing scheduled for October 11, it will effectively end the dispute on the side of EGT.

Among other charges, the NLRB has accused workers of being "violent and aggressive." In fact, the only injuries so far occurred when a contractor drove through a picket line late last month, hitting two workers. No one was charged in that incident, caught on video. One worker on the picket line, however, was arrested immediately afterward.

In the court filing, NLRB Regional Director Richard Ahearn also wrote that the court should rule against the workers because they had "induced or encouraged individuals employed by EGT and other persons... to refuse to handle or work on goods and/or refuse to perform services"--i.e., the most basic tactics involved in any labor dispute.

The ultimate aim of both the government and the corporations is to significantly reduce the wages and benefits of longshoremen as part of the campaign against the living conditions of the working class as a whole.

The intervention of the NLRB came at the same time as the Obama administration, through the FBI, opened an investigation into unsubstantiated charges that workers involved in the two-week-long strike at Verizon last month engaged in violent "sabotage."

The principal concern of the ILWU in the dispute is the preservation of its dues base and control over the docks. The union, which has sought to adopt a "left" posture, including a one-day strike against the Iraq War in 2008, is committed to its political alliance with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

In the current dispute, the ILWU has sought to fan nationalist sentiment, portraying the struggle against

EGT as a battle against foreign multinational corporations, even though the principal company in the joint venture, Bunge, is based in the United States.

In the last major conflict between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association, during contract negotiations in 2002, the PMA responded to an alleged slowdown by the workers with a lockout. The Bush administration backed the PMA, invoking the Taft-Hartley Act against the workers.

The ILWU ultimately agreed to the major demands of the PMA, including the hiring of non-union workers in clerical positions related to the introduction of new technologies.

Two years later, in the summer of 2004, the ILWU reached an agreement with the PMA to hire 3,000 "casual" workers, part of a strategy by the shipping companies to increase the proportion of workers with uncertain hours and fewer rights.



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