

Federal judge finds Washington dockworkers union in contempt

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Through court actions and arrests, the state is escalating its campaign against longshoremen protesting efforts by a company in Washington to undermine their wages and hire non-union labor.

US District Court Judge Ronald Leighton has ruled Longview, Washington Local 21 of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in contempt of court for defying a temporary restraining order he issued September 1. At that time he ordered the union to cease blocking trains entering the port terminal.

The ILWU has been engaged in a long-running dispute with grain exporter EGT Development, which has completed construction of a \$200 million terminal at the Port of Longview.

Thursday's ruling arose out of a September 8 request by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to find the union in contempt for actions taken by Local 21 members and supporters last week. It has also sought, along with lawyers for EGT, a ban on all picketing as well as fines against the union.

An attempt in Vancouver, Washington to block a train heading toward the terminal proved unsuccessful. A similar effort to stop the same train once it reached the port entrance in Longview was suppressed by police in riot gear who were armed with tear gas and rifles loaded with rubber bullets. Nineteen protesters were arrested and charged with trespassing. The next morning several hundred workers and supporters allegedly entered the port's terminal grounds and dumped grain from the train cars.

That same day thousands of dockworkers in the Northwest took action in a wildcat strike, shutting down ports in Seattle, Tacoma, Everett and Anacortes, Washington in solidarity with the struggle in Longview. (See, "Wildcat strikes shut down Washington docks for one day")

Judge Leighton responded to this by announcing that he was modifying his restraining order to make it permanent and extending it to the entire ILWU and all shipping. He warned, "The regard for the law is absent here. Somebody is going to be hurt seriously."

Leighton's order also prohibited "picket line violence, threats and property damage." However, the only injuries incurred so far resulted from a contractor driving through the picket line injuring two workers. Police ignored the driver, although a picketer was arrested immediately afterwards.

The NLRB is pursuing charges of unfair labor practices against the ILWU which, if upheld, will effectively end the dispute in EGT's favor. A hearing is to be held October 11 on those charges in Judge Leighton's courtroom.

On Monday, Cowlitz County Sheriff Mark Nelson announced the arrest of two persons in connection with the invasion of port property and dumping of grain. A union longshoreman was arrested on suspicion of four felony charges, including intimidation of a witness and sabotage, while a woman was arrested on suspicion of misdemeanor charges. The sheriff stated that more arrests will be forthcoming. On Thursday, six additional people were arrested on misdemeanor suspicions.

The conflict, now entering its ninth month, centers on the refusal of EGT to hire ILWU members to run its facility. EGT has filed a lawsuit against the port contending that its contract with the port allows it to hire non-union labor. Following a number of protests in July, EGT hired a contractor employing workers from General Construction and Operating Engineers Local 701.

EGT is a joint venture between Japan-based Itochu, St. Louis-based Bunge North America and Korean shipper STX Pan Ocean. It is the largest export grain terminal on the West Coast and is the only one built in North America since 1987. Designed with state-of-the-art automation to minimize labor and transportation costs, the facility is expected to handle four 100-car trains simultaneously. Only 50 workers will be required to run the entire operation, and about 15 of those will be administrative.

Judge Leighton's action is part of a concerted effort, led by the federal government along with EGT, to destroy all the gains made by longshoremen since the bloody struggles of the 1930s. The federal government, through the NLRB, along with the courts and local police has made clear its intent to crush any resistance to the destruction of wages, working conditions and benefits.

Longshoremen in Longview spoke to the WSWS about their struggle. Because of a union prohibition on speaking to the media, picketers asked to remain anonymous.

One worker said, "It's just corporate greed. Even its huge \$2.4 billion profit is just from their West Coast operations."

Another worker stated, "I figured it would happen. They violated the contract they originally signed with the port. There was conflict from day one."

A third said, "They are planning on operating as if they already won."

The determined opposition of port workers to these

attacks has been amply demonstrated by the ongoing struggles against EGT. In particular, the wildcat strikes that shut down several ports in the Northwest show the willingness of these workers to fight.

In contrast to this militancy, the ILWU refuses to mobilize its membership in job actions to defend Port of Longview dockworkers. The actions of the union are determined by its political alliance with the Democratic Party and its support for the capitalist system. As is clear from the initial response of the state, any serious and sustained mobilization of workers to defend their jobs and living conditions would come into immediate conflict with the federal government and pose a struggle against the Obama administration.

The ILWU has been a strong backer of Obama. Acknowledging the growing anger among broad sections of the working class, ILWU President Bob McEllrath recently declared that Obama has "proven to be a disappointment." This is a gross distortion of Obama's role. His administration has spearheaded savage attacks on the working class, from autoworkers to teachers, while handing trillions of dollars to the banks. The NLRB, which is seeking to criminalize Longview port workers, is headed by Obama appointee and labor lawyer Mark Pearce.

In addition, the agreement just signed by the ILWU with West Coast grain elevator operators limits the contract to one year. This will allow the elevator operators to demand any concessions won by EGT earlier than the normal two-year contract would permit.



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