West Coast demonstrations target port operators

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On Monday, Occupy protesters sought to shut down ports across the West Coast. They succeeded in disrupting the ports in Oakland, Longview, and Portland, and caused temporary delays in Seattle and Long Beach.

The largest turnout was at Oakland, which peaked below 2,000 protesters. The most heavy-handed police response was in Seattle where the police used stun grenades and pepper spray to disperse a crowd of several hundred. Eleven people were arrested.

In total, the size of the protests over the whole coast amounted to only a few thousand, significantly fewer than took part in the November 2 march on the Port of Oakland.

The demonstrations were denounced by local businesses and officials, including Democratic Party Mayor of Oakland, Jean Quan, who oversaw earlier brutal attacks on Occupy demonstrators.

The demonstrations come as city officials and police have shut down most of the Occupy encampments, often with brutal violence. Many of these actions have been organized by Democratic Party politicians, and they have been implicitly sanctioned by the Obama administration. The suppression of the protests has raised fundamental political questions, above all the necessity for a political break with the Democratic Party.

However, the principal organizers of the port protests, including middle class groups such as the International Socialist Organization, promoted the demonstrations as a stunt, oriented entirely at bolstering the trade union bureaucracy and pressuring the political establishment.

An Occupy Oakland resolution in late November expanded Occupy Los Angeles's planned protests to the entire West Coast. It expressed solidarity with longshoremen in Washington State who are involved in a labor dispute over the staffing of a grain port. While calling on the Occupy Movement to show solidarity, it did not ask workers to join the picket line or even to honor it.

For their part, the various unions have made clear that the last thing they wanted was for their members to connect their struggles with the working class in general. On December 6, the International President of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), Bob McEllrath, wrote a letter to the local unions which bluntly stated, "As the Occupy movement, which began in September 2011, sweeps this country, there is a real danger that forces outside of the ILWU will attempt to adopt our struggle as their own."

In Longview, Washington, ILWU Local 21 has been involved in a long-running dispute with the grain exporter EGT Development. The ILWU has steadfastly refused to mobilize its members and is worried by a possible repeat of the solidarity strikes that shut down the ports of Seattle, Tacoma, and Anacortes last September.

Similarly in Long Beach, California, ILWU Local 63 Office Clerical Unit (OCU) has been working without a contract for 18 months. On December 2, the union called a one-day strike but watched ILWU longshoremen and marine clerks cross their picket lines after an arbitrator declared the strike "not bona fide."

According to a member of the OCU who spoke to the WSWS anonymously, the president of the Local 63 OCU, John Fageaux, called the strike a success. Since then, members have been told that the negotiating team has been making progress. Since the details of negotiations are kept secret from the membership, they have no way of knowing.

During the one-day action, workers on the picket line

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were specifically told by union officials to send away any sympathetic Occupy protesters who might show up.

For groups like the International Socialist Organization, the December 12 action was an opportunity to promote various trade union officials. From the beginning of the Occupy protests, the ISO and similar organizations have worked to establish the control of the right-wing union apparatus, which functions to enforce attacks on the working class and maintain the political domination of the Democratic Party.

A December 8 article by the ISO's Lee Sustar, "Organizing for the Port Shutdown," chides those who have criticized the December 12 action for not appealing to the workers themselves. The ISO and other organizations clearly hoped that the action would be taken up by the ILWU and turned into a semi-official one-day strike, as the union has done on previous occasions to provide it with left cover. In these cases, work stoppage is authorized when a local arbitrator declares that pickets make for an unsafe work environment.

"If ILWU members stay away from their jobs December 12, it will be the result of a port labor arbitrator's ruling that the picket lines have made it impossible to ensure a safe work environment."

The demonstrations would seek to "establish a community picket line and ask ILWU members and other port workers to honor it on the basis of solidarity," Sustar writes. "This isn't a far-out idea, given the ILWU tradition of respect for community picket lines and the union's early support for the Occupy movement."

The ILWU leadership clearly made a decision that there was no need for it to give another nod to the Occupy demonstrations, since they had already been largely shut down by Democratic Party officials. This did not deter Sustar from praising union officials, including a decision by the Alameda Labor Council to postpone a vote on a resolution that would have directly denounced the pickets.

If the ILWU struck, it would come into direct conflict with the Obama administration, but if it honors an occasional community picket, then the ISO can continue to call the union militant and justify their own subservience to the union leadership.

Sustar concludes his article with the declaration: "Everyone who wants to see the revival of a fighting labor movement should support these actions." The aim of the ISO is not to build a "fighting labor movement," but to bolster the position of the very unions that work actively to suppress any independent action of the working class.

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