

Portland, Oregon port union accepts concessions contract

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The union representing security officials at the Port of Portland [Oregon] negotiated an eleventh-hour tentative agreement on Saturday night. Twenty five members of Local 28 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), who provide security at three Port terminals, had been primed to man picket lines at 6 a.m. Sunday morning.

Security workers have been without a contract for more than a year and a half due to the Port's insistence on a change to contractual language allowing for their replacement by a private security company. The union could not accept such a change without ensuring its own destruction.

The ILWU made wage and benefit concessions in order to retain jurisdiction. At this point details of the concessions are unavailable. However, the union's web page states that, "The union successfully prevented privatization of our family wage jobs, and the Port controlled the costs of their wage and benefits to our members."

The Port had sought an emergency injunction banning the strike in Multnomah County District Court last week. The judge rejected the contention that a danger to public safety and welfare was created if a strike took place. According to the November 20 *Oregonian*, the Port planned to "hire workers to replace the 25 longshore union members during a strike."

If a strike had occurred, longshoremen—who may be involved soon in their own industrial action and have a history of refusing to cross picket lines—would have effectively shut down the three terminals.

The Port of Portland itself suffers from a significant drop in shipping since the 2008 financial crisis. Every index—from calls by oceangoing vessels and total tonnage to the number of containers and vehicles arriving—has experienced a decline in recent years. The

number of containers handled at Terminal 6 has fallen from 245,459 in 2008 to 198,179 in 2011, a drop of 20 percent.

The potential impact of the strike, the possibility of which had already diverted several cargo ships, got the attention of Gov. John Kitzhaber's office. The Democratic Party governor intervened on Friday, ostensibly to pressure both sides to arrive at an agreement. However, all nine commissioners who oversee port operations and are pursuing the conflict with the security workers were appointed by the governor.

Discussions held on Saturday with the state's top mediator and the subsequent media coverage sought to intimidate the workers with the possible fallout from the strike: the impact on jobs created by the port, the dependency of local businesses on timely deliveries of goods and the possibility of importers and exporters moving to other ports.

For example, the November 23 *Oregonian* asserted, "A Northwest freight-transport industry leader expects Portland's labor turmoil will cause [South Korean] Hanjin Shipping Co., the main shipping line calling on the container terminal, to pull out permanently instead of renewing its contract expiring Dec. 31. Port officials have said that if shipping lines or the terminal operator leave, Oregon's only container terminal would shut down for good."

Meanwhile longshoremen working under the Northwest Grain Handlers' Agreement face a Wednesday deadline on a "best and final offer" from the Pacific Northwest Grain Handlers Association. The six grain shipping terminals represented by this consortium of four companies are demanding concessions despite having made huge profits from the shortage-induced high-priced wheat and grain they

transport.

ILWU locals in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Seattle and Tacoma, Washington, have been involved in fruitless negotiations since August 29 with the Association. The contract expired at the end of September. For its part, the Association is asserting that “workplace rules in the EGT [Export Grain Terminal in Longview, Washington] contract are much more advantageous” and seeks the same conditions for a new agreement. They also point to the Kalama Port as having “workplace rules that don’t apply at Grain Handlers Association terminals.”

In Longview, the EGT sought to establish the ability to hire non-ILWU workers on the West Coast docks for the first time in nearly 80 years. Several large demonstrations in Vancouver and Longview attempted to block grain shipments via train and a wildcat strike by port workers in Seattle, Tacoma, and Anacortes, Washington erupted in the struggle against EGT.

Despite claiming “victory,” the ILWU made significant concessions including the loss of the union hiring hall—a gain of the historic 1934 West Coast strike—allowing the employers to maintain their own lists of workers and fire any worker without cause. Additionally, employers can now do union work during any work stoppage.

An ILWU dissident faction demanded at the time that the EGT contract be declared “null and void,” since, in violation of the union constitution, “the membership of Longview Local 21 never even had a chance to read the contract first” before voting on it. The *Oregonian* acknowledges that “some vocal members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union are furious over the concessions at EGT and unlikely to fall in line.”

On Monday the ILWU requested an extension to the Wednesday deadline imposed by the grain handlers’ association. The association has not responded, but there is every indication they are prepared to lock the dockworkers out.

Despite its left posturing, the ILWU officialdom has been centrally concerned with maintaining its dues base and control of jobs at the ports. The result has been a continuous loss of wages, benefits and rights by dockworkers and clerks in every struggle.

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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