

Los Angeles and Long Beach port clerical workers on strike

Thomas Gaist
1 December 2012

A strike by the Office Clerical Unit (OCU) of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) entered its fourth day on Friday. The strike has shut down large portions of Southern California's heavily trafficked seaports. Clerical workers have been working without a contract since June 2010 and have raised concerns about job security.

The OCU set up picket lines at 7 of 8 terminals at the Port of Los Angeles and at 3 of 6 terminals at the Port of Long Beach. As of November 30, at least 18 ships were unable to perform loading or unloading operations, while a few headed to other ports.

The Office Clerical Unit is part of the 50,000-member ILWU. These workers handle cargo all along the west coast of the US and Canada, as well as in Hawaii. The 10,000 ILWU members who work at the Port of LA refused to cross the picket lines.

On Tuesday, initial walkouts were met with an injunction to return to work, issued by a Los Angeles arbitrator. However, workers refused to return to work. As of the evening of November 29, the OCU reportedly returned to negotiations with the employers, but workers remained on strike.

Together, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach handle 40 percent of import trade in the US. Numerous commentators and officials have expressed anxiety over the effects that a port shutdown would have, especially on large businesses such as Walmart and Home Depot.

Among the issues in the strike is the loss of clerical jobs due to outsourcing. The executive director of the Port recently claimed that they are losing their "competitive advantage," pointing to the diversion of ships to Mexican ports. The Obama administration's response to "outsourcing" has been its plan for "insourcing," which amounts to the reduction of US wages to the level of Chinese or Mexican workers.

Both California senators, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, as well as Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, have urged the two sides of the dispute to overcome their differences and return to work as soon as possible.

Since as early as 1961, the ILWU has presided over and facilitated the erosion of jobs and social conditions of the workers they claim to represent, in close alliance with the Democratic Party. More recently, in 2002, when the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) shut down all ports on the West Coast, the ILWU agreed to major demands of the PMA, including the hiring of nonunion workers in some clerical positions.

In 2004, the ILWU reached an agreement that allowed for the hiring of 3,000 "casual" workers, with uncertain hours and fewer rights.

The main port workers unions—the ILWU on the West Coast and the International Longshoremen's Association on the East Coast—have isolated different struggles, preventing joint action against the port operators and shipping companies. Their main concern has been to preserve their dues base.

Threats of a strike on the Eastern seaboard, the ports of New York and New Jersey, prompted an acceleration of holiday shipments. In September, a strike by the International Longshoremen's Association, which would have closed ports from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico, was avoided through a 90-day extension of negotiations, with the agreement of the union. With the extension expiring on December 1st, the stage is set for a new round of conflict between workers and management.

Last week, ILWU Local 28 agreed to a concessions contract that averted a strike at the Port of Portland in Oregon. In exchange for ensuring that jobs would remain under the control of the union, the ILWU

accepted concessions on wages and benefits. (See, “Portland, Oregon port union accepts concessions contract”)



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact