

Grain haulers' lockout of Northwest longshoremen postponed

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Responding to a request from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), West Coast grain terminal owners extended their “best, last and final offer” deadline until December 8. They had originally planned to unilaterally impose their final offer and—absent workers’ consent—to lock out longshoremen as of midnight November 28.

ILWU spokeswoman Jennifer Sargent presented the union’s position, “We believe that additional negotiations would be fruitful and have proposed additional dates to the multinational owners of the grain terminals.” Stating that the union felt that talks were not at an impasse, Sargent told the Associated Press, “We’ve offered shift extensions, wage freezes, a rollover of our current agreement, and many more attempts to keep the grain flowing.”

The grain haulers management is represented by the Pacific Northwest Grain Haulers Association, a consortium of four companies operating six terminals from Portland, Oregon up to Seattle, Washington. The six terminals collectively account for the export of 25 percent of US wheat and grain—\$10 billion of wheat, corn, and soybeans yearly—mostly to Asia with additional amounts to the Middle East.

Management is prepared to continue operations with strikebreakers in the event of a walkout, hiring the notorious strikebreaking company Gettier. Describing itself as the “nation’s leading Strike Security Company,” the company offers to videotape picket lines in order to gather evidence for “injunctive relief” and to escort employees and vehicles “safely in and out of your labor strike place.”

The US Coast Guard has said it will keep protesters who take to boats away from the grain ships.

With this extension, the union dodged a confrontation with the grain haulers just as 800 ILWU strikers at the

Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach halted shipping at the nation’s busiest ports, accounting for 40 percent of US import trade. The possibility of a united West Coast offensive by longshoremen against ongoing concession demands by the Ports and terminal operators most probably played the key role in the decision of the grain haulers to approve the request for a postponement. (See “Los Angeles and Long Beach port clerical workers on strike”)

In a similar manner, grain terminal operators had extended the master grain contract for only one year, from September 2011 to September 2012, in order to avoid engaging in contentious negotiations and a possible strike during the conflict then taking place between the ILWU and the owners of a newly built grain terminal in Longview, Washington.

The role of the ILWU has been to isolate local struggles on the docks in order to more easily sell them out and maintain a favored position with the employers and consequently maintain its dues income. Several days before the grain haulers’ original deadline, a shutdown of three terminals at the Port of Portland was avoided when the union granted wage and benefit concessions in return for the continued recognition of its jurisdiction over security workers at the port. (See “Portland, Oregon port union accepts concessions contract”)

Replying to comments received from the longshore union along with the request for an extension, grain hauler spokesman Pat McCormick stated, “I don’t expect any job action in the near term.”

In keeping with secret negotiations that began at the end of October under federal mediation, the content of those comments were not divulged. The ILWU contract had expired at the end of September with no new agreement after a month of talks.

In announcing the original November deadline, McCormick wrote in an email, “The core disagreements are not over salaries and benefits, but rather uncompetitive workplace rules that are significantly different from those agreed to between the ILWU and two competing grain terminals on the Columbia River.”

The reference is to two terminal operations—Kalama Export Company and the newly built Export Grain Terminal (EGT)—that have gained deep concessions from the union. EGT, located in Longview, Washington, had waged a battle to operate with non-ILWU labor—which has dominated West Coast docks for the last 80 years—in keeping with a background of ongoing attacks by shipping companies and terminal operators against longshoremen. Union efforts to prevent EGT’s plans involved blocking trains bound for the port, an invasion of EGT’s facilities along with a simultaneous wildcat strike by thousands of port workers in Seattle, Tacoma and Anacortes, Washington.

The contract signed with EGT this past February, despite the militant opposition of the rank and file, establishes substantial inroads into the gains made by dockworkers since the historic 1934 strike that shut down West Coast docks. The union hiring hall—the major gain of the 1934 strike—was surrendered, allowing for the return of the hated company hiring list with the employer determining who is to work. Those on the hiring list may be fired at the “sole discretion of the employer” with no recourse to arbitration. Work shifts of 12 hours with no overtime after 8 hours were introduced. Managers and “outside employees” will be permitted to do longshoremen’s work during work stoppages. EGT can declare the contract null and void after three “illegal” work stoppages.

A copy of the association’s proposals posted by the *Oregonian* show that they—no less than EGT—wish to gut the rights of longshoremen. The only way forward for longshoremen is through the building of rank-and-file committees uniting all dockworkers against the machinations of the union. This must be coupled with a political offensive against the courts and every level of government—which will side with the employers—by building a new political leadership in the working class, the Socialist Equality Party.



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