

Los Angeles area port workers' strike continues

Thomas Gaist
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Negotiations between the employers and striking port workers in Southern California came to a halt on Sunday, as the employers walked away from the table. The dock owners blamed the breakdown on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which, they said, had rejected necessary concessions for new hires.

Employers in the port sector, like in the rest of the economy, have increasingly sought to restructure their operations with a largely casual and part time workforce. They have used lower-paid new hires with virtually no job protections to replace more senior, higher paid workers.

The 800 clerical workers on strike have shut down 10 of 14 terminals of the country's most heavily trafficked port complex. Several thousand dockworkers in Los Angeles and Long Beach have refused to cross picket lines.

With concern in the corporate and political establishment growing over the financial fallout from the port closures—estimated to be as much as a billion dollars a day—leading Democratic politicians are dropping their phony claims of support and openly threatening the striking workers. Los Angeles Mayor Villagairosa warned the union leadership, “This cannot continue...The cost is too great to continue down this failed road.”

Corporations that depend on the major shipping lines affected by the strike have been pressing for the White House to intervene. In 2002, President Bush sought a court order ending a strike on the West Coast. While the Obama administration has not yet intervened, there is no doubt the Democratic Party is carrying out behind-the-scenes efforts to press the ILWU for a quick agreement.

Militancy on the part of the dockworkers—whose long

history of struggle includes the 1934 San Francisco general strike—is fueling anxiety in the ruling class. Jonathan Gold, a vice president with the National Federation of Retailers, commented that shippers are hesitant to reroute to other West Coast ports, fearing that workers will respond with further strikes.

The NFR has sought presidential as well as congressional intervention to open the port. “Our members are very nervous and very upset about the impact of the (Los Angeles) strike on their businesses...They have very fresh memories of what happened in 2002 and what is happening on the east coast,” Gold stated.

While dockworkers are determined to fight, the ILWU has a long record of betrayed struggles and collaboration with the corporations. Over decades, this has led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the steady erosion of the conditions of dockworkers and port clerks. At the same time, with the help of the various middle class pseudo-left organizations, including the Stalinist Communist Party, the ILWU has sought to present itself as a “progressive” union.

In 2008, the ILWU staged a single day shutdown of ports on the West Coast, ostensibly to oppose the Iraq war. That same year it enthusiastically endorsed President Obama, who has, since his election, presided over a further acceleration of militarism internationally and class war against the American working class at home.

Last month, the Local 28 ILWU of Portland, Oregon, accepted a contract in eleventh-hour negotiations that imposed wage and benefit cuts. While the ILWU claimed victory, they ceded to management vital hiring prerogatives, which were won through the general strike of 1934.

Washington State port workers under ILWU jurisdiction carried out wildcat strikes in 2011, shutting down ports in Seattle, Tacoma, and Anacortes. The strike action was in response to continuous attacks by the shipping companies and port operators against the longshoremen. The employers are seeking to roll back an 80-year-old precedent and begin hiring non-union workers on the West Coast again. Under these conditions, the ongoing actions of the clerical workers can easily spread beyond Los Angeles and beyond the control of the unions.

The port strike is an expression of growing opposition in the working class to the decades-long attack on jobs and the living standards. The struggle can only be taken forward if the isolation of the strike is broken and it is development into a much wider industrial and political struggle against the Obama administration and the profit system it defends. This will require the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the IWLU.



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