

West Coast longshoremen overwhelmingly reject grain handlers' contract offer

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Members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) voted Monday by an overwhelming 93.8 percent to reject a contract described by the grain handlers association as their “last, best and final” offer.

The Pacific Northwest Grain Handlers Association responded to the thumbs-down with a statement indicating that they plan to proceed with a lockout of the dockworkers and the implementation of a strikebreaking campaign. Spokesman Pat McCormick stated, “In light of the union’s rejection of the offer, the employers are reviewing their options. Regardless of the outcome, they remain committed to operating.”

According to the *Oregonian*, “Quietly, owners of Portland, Vancouver and Puget Sound terminals have spent months preparing for a battle royal on the waterfront, lining up troops and assets like chess pieces. The agribusiness giants have laid legal groundwork for a lockout, which could occur any time after a Monday noon deadline.”

Nine grain terminals in the region jointly handle 25 percent of the US grain and 50 percent of its wheat, representing billions of dollars in grain export, most of it to Asia. With the recent withdrawal from the Association by Temco—without explanation—the remaining three companies representing four grain terminals: United Grain Corp., Columbia Grain Inc., and Louis Dreyfus Commodities, have persisted with much the same demands since negotiations started. Union committeeman Leal Sundet charged, “The grain exporters have not bargained in good faith, instead rejecting every effort by the union to reach a compromise settlement,” adding, “In essence, their ‘last and final’ offer was not fundamentally different than that originally presented in September.”

Negotiations between the union and the grain haulers

began last August. The contract expired at the end of September without an agreement. A “last, best and final offer” was originally announced on November 16 and since then, two extensions have been made.

The grain handlers are demanding the same concessions made to the EGT (Export Grain Terminal) in Longview, Washington and to two terminals in Kalama, Washington, one of which is owned by Temco. Among the demands are 12-hour shifts with no overtime, non-union personnel carrying out union jobs during work stoppages, fewer workers loading ships, and, most egregiously, the loss of the union hiring hall—a gain of the historic 1934 West Coast strike.

At EGT a two-year struggle—including demonstrations to block trains carrying grain to the newly built terminal, the storming of an EGT yard, and spontaneous wildcat strikes at several ports in Washington—ended with the ILWU acceding to the company’s demands. ILWU President Robert McEllrath described the agreement then as “a win for the ILWU, EGT, and the Longview community.”

That nearly 3,000 dockworkers in Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver, Washington and Portland, Oregon voted down the proposal by such an overwhelming percentage reflects the increasing determination of the working class to put an end to the continuous loss of rights and benefits.

Over the last decade the port operators and shipping companies have sought to restructure relations with their workers through the use of lower-paid part-time labor and the use of casual labor, new categories of workers without union representation, pay or benefits, and the use of technology to decimate jobs with the remaining workforce subjected to ever-greater productivity demands.

In 2002, a ten-day lockout by the Pacific Maritime

Association (PMA), representing West Coast shipping companies, was ended by the Bush administration with the imposition of the anti-union Taft Hartley law. At that time, the PMA first raised contractual language changes that would reduce the role of the union in both the representation of workers (data entry workers would be non-union) and minimizing the function of the union hiring hall.

Months ago, the association hired the notorious strikebreaking outfit J.R. Gettier & Associates to enforce a lockout. From Portland to Seattle, logistics are in place to maintain operations, from non-union tugboats standing by, to dock ships, to out-of-state scab labor housed at nearby hotels.

While the owners have scrupulously worked out their plans to destroy the bitterly won rights of dockworkers, the ILWU has worked to isolate the longshoremen. At the beginning of December, the ILWU, insisting that talks were not at an impasse, appealed for another extension of the “final” offer deadline. In the midst of a crippling shutdown of the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports in California by ILWU members, the grain haulers readily accepted the offer.

The role of the ILWU has been to isolate each struggle of longshoremen while refusing to advance any perspective to unite dockworkers in a joint offensive against the ongoing attacks by terminal owners and port operators.

On the East Coast, Florida Republican Governor Rick Scott, as well as retail and manufacturing representatives, have requested that President Obama invoke Taft Hartley in order to prevent a shutdown by 14,500 dockworkers of ports from Maine to Texas. A 90-day extension of the contract between the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) and the US Maritime Alliance Ltd. is set to expire midnight Saturday. The Alliance is insisting that royalty fees on container ships—which form part of dockworkers pay—be frozen at 2011 levels. The last time the ILA struck was in 1977.

In the event of a strike on the East Coast and the Northwest the possibility exists that Obama could invoke Taft Hartley and issue back-to-work orders for both regions. During the EGT struggle, the federal government, through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), aggressively intervened on EGT’s side, filing court actions supporting the company and

seeking to criminalize rank-and-file demonstrations.

The ILWU has in practice, if not in words, completely disassociated itself from the militant traditions that an insurgent working class established out of the bitter 1934 shutdown of West Coast ports. A serious struggle against the ports, shippers, and terminal owners requires that leadership of any strike be taken out of the hands of the ILWU. Dockworkers must build rank-and-file committees to organize a unified response by longshoremen and to appeal for support from all sections of workers. Such action must be accompanied by a political initiative against the Democratic and Republican parties. A new party of the working class has to be built, the Socialist Equality Party.



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