

Los Angeles/Long Beach longshore clerks vote down sell-out contract

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13 February 2013

On February 6, clerical employees at the Los Angeles/Long Beach port, the busiest port in the United States, rejected a concessions contract that had been negotiated in December. The combined LA/LB facility handles 40 percent of US container shipping. The clerks are members of Local 63 the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

The ILWU bureaucracy had used the tentative settlement as a pretext to end an eight-day strike that had shut down the port in December, when thousands of dock workers refused to cross picket lines set up by the 800 clerks.

As a result, 10 out of the 14 terminals at the port were shut down, resulting in an estimated \$8 billion in corporate losses.

Initially, the limited strike had been called by the ILWU as a protest walkout, a time worn trick by the bureaucracy to blow off steam. The strike, which began on November 27, 2012, was timed after most of the Christmas season cargo had already been processed, to minimize the impact of the strike. Local 63 members have been working without a contract for over two and a half years.

Two big issues in this dispute have been outsourcing of clerical duties by the shipping companies and the destruction of full-time clerical jobs, replacing them with part-timers or not replacing them at all.

Under pressure from shippers and government officials, the ILWU came up with an agreement that it tried to sell to its members. “This was a community effort that will benefit working families for many years to come,” ILWU Local 63-OCU President John Fageaux Jr. said at the time. “It’s going to be important going forward, working with the employer, to make sure that the jobs that are here, remain here,” said union negotiator Trinie Thompson.

Furthermore, the December agreement was presented as a victory by ILWU International Vice President Ray Familathe: “This victory was accomplished because of support from the entire ILWU family of 10,000 members in the harbor community.”

“Our campaign was always focused on securing good jobs and stopping the outsourcing that threatened working families in our harbor communities,” Familathe added.

The tentative contract, which was arrived at under the tutelage of federal mediators and LA mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, included flexibility in staffing (i.e., the destruction of full-time jobs). ILWU officials justified the givebacks as a way of avoiding the loss of jobs to overseas ports, and to the poor economy. Both the ILWU and the Harbor Employers Association assured workers that contained in the agreement was a guarantee that no work would be outsourced to other places. The ILWU agreed to the destruction of 51 jobs immediately and 14 more through attrition.

Many clerks suspect that their work is already being outsourced to places such as India, Costa Rica, Taiwan, and Texas.

The entire 40-member bargaining committee had approved the tentative agreement that ended the walkout. That all 16 clerical units have now overwhelmingly rejected it is clear evidence of the both of the enormous gap that exists between the workers and the ILWU leaders—who confidently had predicted that the agreement would be approved—and of the workers’ lack of confidence in the ILWU.

The rejection of the contract clears the way for another strike.

The contract rejection by the clerical workers in the West Coast takes place in the wake of a tentative contract on the East Coast between the 65,000-member

International Longshore Union (ILA) and the employers group USMX. The tentative contract averted a strike at 14 Atlantic ports.

At issue were container royalties and work rules. While few details were released, Savannah, Georgia Local 1414 leader Willie Seymor—declaring his “satisfaction” with the contract—admitted that the union did not get everything it wanted (typically a union code-phrase indicating givebacks to the employers).



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