

US west coast dockers union forces through another concessions contract

Hector Cordon
30 August 2014

Nearly two years since contract negotiations opened between the Pacific Northwest Grain Handlers Association (PNGHA) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), a tentative agreement was reached mid-August and was subsequently approved by longshoremen last week.

The contract, arrived at under federal mediation and endorsed by the ILWU, contains virtually all the demands that PNGHA made in its “last, best and final offer” in December of 2012, an offer rejected by 93.8 percent of the rank and file.

The grain association sought over 750 contractual givebacks, including the same concessions that were given in January 2013 to the newly opened Export Grain Terminal (EGT) in Longview, Washington. ILWU President Robert McEllrath at the time described the EGT agreement as “a win for the ILWU, EGT, and the Longview community.”

The PNGHA has insisted that it had to receive the same concessions as EGT and the Kalama, Washington port in order to match the lower labor costs associated with the more flexible work rules and to remain competitive with the advanced technology incorporated in the new terminal.

Undoubtedly this agreement will undercut the position of the 20,000 members of the ILWU currently negotiating a new contract with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). The PMA is aggressively seeking cuts in wages, health benefits and pensions. Although the old contract expired on July 1, the ILWU has refused any strike action and continues to work without a contract.

The new agreement, in effect until May 2018, dispenses with many of the work rules and shop floor powers won by longshoremen since the historic 1934 83-day strike when 35,000 maritime workers shut down

all shipping on the West Coast. The eight-hour day is gone and dockworkers can now be forced to work up to 12 hours, without overtime pay. The control room will be limited to management staffing, thereby enabling them to immediately oversee workers’ productivity.

The “supercargo” job, charged with overseeing the loading of ships, is now a management position.

Management also has the right to replace workers who engage in work stoppages. Therefore the impact of the “right” to honor “legitimate” picket lines, participate in stop work meetings, and to refuse work under unsafe conditions is now limited if not nullified.

Most egregiously, the union hiring hall—the jewel won in the 1934 struggle—has been surrendered. Workers’ ability to work at the docks, as before 1934, will now be at the mercy of modern-day “gang-bosses” with management rejecting militants and “trouble-makers.”

The ILWU has, from the very beginning, isolated the struggles of longshoremen while refusing to advance any perspective to unite dockworkers in an industry-wide offensive against the ongoing attacks by terminal owners and port operators.

The goal has been to force through a concessions contract against the widespread opposition of the rank and file. Despite the provocative actions of grain shippers—draconian concession demands; widely publicized preparations for a strikebreaking operation; the declaration of an impasse in December 2012 and the subsequent imposition of their final offer at United Grain, Columbia Grain and Louis Dreyfuss; and lockouts by United Grain and Columbia Grain in February and May 2013, respectively—the union has systematically sought to wear down and demoralize the membership to prevent any rank-and-file initiatives.

In response to the impasse declaration and the

imposition of management's final offer, ILWU International President McEllrath had the four locals continue working the docks: Local 8 in Portland, Local 4 in Vancouver, Local 21 in Longview and Kalama, Local 19 in Seattle, and Local 23 in Tacoma, Washington. The response to the lockouts was to post isolated and ineffective pickets at United Grain and Columbia Grain.

Instead of mobilizing the rank and file, the union relied on the courts and appeals to the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB, under President Obama's appointee, intervened aggressively to defend EGT, filing court actions supporting the company and seeking to criminalize rank-and-file demonstrations.

Appealing to the most backward nationalist sentiments, the ILWU sought to demonize the foreign-owned grain companies that refused to sign as opposed to the American-owned Temco, which split from PNGHA on the eve of the lockout to sign a five-year agreement. This served to line up the workers behind their own employers. "Ports and workers have a common interest in preventing big companies from manipulating us into compromising safety standards or competing against ourselves," a statement from the ILWU declared. However, Temco will now seek to activate the re-opener clause granted by the union in order to obtain the same concessions as PNGHA.

A letter from the Retail Industry Leaders Association, the largest retail shippers group in the world, expressed the group's fear that longshoreman in two major unresolved West Coast contracts, the PMA as well as the grain handlers, could take matters into their own hands. President Sandra Kennedy wrote: "While goods continue to move at an efficient rate through the West Coast ports of entry, each day without a finalized agreement jeopardizes the movement of goods destined for shelves during the all-important holiday season." With this, she underlined the crucial role of the ILWU in forcing through the concessions at PNGHA.

The ILWU points to the 88.4 percent "yes" vote for the new contract, but neglects to cite the total number of eligible voters, which is around 3,000. With 1,478 "yes" votes and 193 "no" votes, this means that more than half of the membership either refused to cast ballots or voted to reject the contact outright.

Once Temco renegotiates the agreement for its three terminals, nine Northwest grain shippers from Seattle

to Portland will have wrested historic concessions from dockworkers through the collusion of the ILWU with the ports and terminal operators. These operations account for more than 25 percent of all US grain exports.

The author also recommends:

West Coast longshoremen overwhelmingly reject grain handlers' contract offer

[27 December 2012]

Contract expires for Pacific Coast dockworkers in US and Canada

[2 July 2014]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact