

Obama, port owners line up against West Coast dockworkers

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20 February 2015

Dispatched to San Francisco by President Obama, US Labor Secretary Thomas Perez met Wednesday with representatives of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association, days after the employers' association locked out 20,000 dockworkers at 29 ports along the West Coast of the United States.

The purpose of the meeting, held under a media blackout, was to give the ILWU its marching orders to squash the resistance of dockworkers and impose another sellout agreement that will attack long-time job protections, living standards and working conditions.

The White House intervention follows calls by a bipartisan group of congressmen and a major retail association—dependent on imports that flow through the docks—for Obama to use the Taft-Hartley Act to break any strike that might erupt. The administration is particularly concerned that dockworkers could link up with the ongoing strike of oil workers and become a catalyst for a broader movement of workers against more than a decade of stagnant wages.

The Los Angeles-Long Beach area has become a cauldron of social opposition. Oil workers are striking at the nearby Carson refinery, and workers at the Torrance ExxonMobil refinery, which was hit by an industrial explosion Wednesday, expressed their determination to join the walkout in defiance of the United Steelworkers selective strike policy.

On Thursday evening, the United Teachers Los Angeles said its 31,000 teachers and other professional employees might strike for higher wages after the UTLA accepted unpaid days off during the 2007-2009 recession and no wage increases for eight years.

On Wednesday, the PMA distributed its “best and final offer” to employees at ports from Los Angeles, California to Seattle, Washington, a move that could

lay the groundwork for the declaration of an impasse and a full lockout at the docks. Over the last two weeks the PMA has locked out employees for six days, costing workers thousands of dollars in lost overtime and holiday pay.

The PMA is using lockouts and the threat of a government intervention to prevent workers from engaging in any kind of job action to resist the ongoing destruction of jobs and casualization of the workforce. The PMA is also offering an insulting three percent annual raise in the five-year contract offer. Fearing that it could not push such a deal through rank-and-file workers, the ILWU has extended the contract for nine months, giving the PMA and the government ample time to prepare a strikebreaking operation.

In 2002, the ILWU gave employers the right to use computer technology to slash jobs, and in 2008 it allowed automated cargo-handling equipment. In addition, management won the right of bypassing the union hiring hall on a case-by-case basis, to employ its own permanent and contingent workers, as new technology was introduced into the ports. This undermined the achievement won in the 1934 San Francisco general strike, which abolished the hated “shape up system,” where management picked which workers would have a job that day.

The 2008 contract went a long way toward eliminating some of the agreements on guaranteed hours and the sharing of work linked to the introduction of labor saving container technology in the 1970s.

Disputes were left up to a so-called neutral arbitrator. In practice, the union insists that the arbitration has not been neutral and demands the right to replace those arbitrators that have links to the industry and big capital. The PMA has refused.

Six years into the global financial crisis, longshore

workers are in no mood for another giveback contract. Three years ago, in a bitter dispute in Longview, Washington against EGT, a grain exporter, the rank and file showed their determination to fight despite government threats. President Obama mobilized the Coast Guard to escort ships headed to the EGT terminals, openly siding with management against the ILWU.

In the agreement that ended the dispute, brokered by former Democratic governor Chris Gregoire, the ILWU made concessions that gave the company and the port of Longview the right to utilize non-ILWU workers and blacklist militant workers from their facility.

More recently, in 2014 in the port of Los Angeles, dockworkers refused to cross and instead joined picket lines set up by port truck drivers, until they were forced back to work by the ILWU itself. In a cynical maneuver, the ILWU and port management agreed to temporarily extend the previous labor agreement so an arbitrator could use the no-strike pledge in the contract to order dockers to cross the truckers' picket lines. This severely undermined the drivers' fight to formalize their status as employees instead of "independent contractors" who could be hired and fired at will, and forced to pay for the maintenance, fueling and insuring of trucks they leased from the port operators.

Now the PMA is coming for more.

On the weekend of February 7 and 8 and on the following three-day holiday weekend, the PMA locked out ILWU personnel. The employers association also sharply reduced night shift work. The move virtually paralyzed the unloading of ships in 29 West Coast and Hawaiian ports that handle one fourth of US trade worth about one trillion dollars annually. The PMA claimed it was responding to an ILWU-organized go-slow tactic that has been in effect since October 2014.

The employers claim the ILWU in Southern California has unilaterally cut shifts for crane operators from 110 per day to 35, "resulting in tens of thousands of containers sitting on the docks"; of not providing skilled workers through the hiring hall as needed by the PMA; and of not sending out skilled crane operators. The ILWU, for its part, insists that changes in port operations and shortages of trailers for the shipping containers have made the work slow.

The dispute takes place as rapid technological changes are transforming the entire industry. The

congestion at the Ports in Los Angeles, Oakland and elsewhere is in large part the product of the development of mega ships, capable of carrying more than 10,000 20-foot containers, that exceed the outmoded capacity of many US ports.

Citing Neil Davidson, ports analyst at London-based Drewry Shipping Consultants, the *Financial Times* wrote: "US container terminals are the least productive in the developed world, largely because operators, worrying about labor unrest, have been reluctant to invest in modern equipment."

The ILWU has repeatedly acceded to the demands for labor saving changes while seeking to defend the institutional interests of the union apparatus, primarily a minimum number of dues-paying members. The problem is not technology, however, but the control of technology by large corporations and financial institutions, which are only interested in increasing the exploitation of workers and boosting profits.

The contingency of labor that now looms over the West Coast docks is part of global process: workers on tap, subcontracting, zero hour contracts, pay for performance, a modern form of the shape up. To fight, dockworkers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the ILWU and mount a struggle to mobilize the broadest layers of the working class—truckers, teachers, oil workers and others—against the giant corporations, both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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