Union imposes another concession deal on West Coast dockworkers

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A year after negotiations began, West Coast dockworkers voted to accept a new contract with the industry group representing 71 shippers, marine terminal operators and stevedores.

With the voting results announced last Friday, the five-year agreement between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) will be retroactive to July 1 of last year. It will cover 20,000 dockworkers employed at 29 ports on the West Coast and Canada, including major container ports such as Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland, Portland, Seattle and Tacoma. All told, these ports handle one half of all maritime trade in the US.

The ratification of the deal—which the ILWU reported was approved by 82 percent—was not a vote of confidence in the union or the settlement it reached, which will only continue concessions. Instead dockworkers have no confidence that the ILWU would lead any fight against the PMA and the Obama administration, which is backing the employers.

The contract was tentatively approved by the ILWU in February after an intervention by the Obama White House. At that time, Labor Secretary Thomas Perez flew to the West Coast and threatened to move negotiations to Washington. Along with Penny Pritzker, Obama's billionaire Commerce Secretary, a slew of politicians and corporate newspapers gave their marching orders to the union to reach an agreement. The ILWU obediently accommodated, announcing a new contract two days later.

The ILWU, which is allied to the Democratic Party and a fervent Obama supporter, feared that restive dockworkers might take matters into their own hands—a concern shared by the White House—to oppose the PMA's "last, best and final offer" and its multiple lockouts that had cost workers thousands of dollars in weekend and holiday pay. Both the unions and the Obama administration were concerned that such a struggle could be an impetus for a broader mobilization of workers in the US who have suffered through the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression even as corporate profits and the stock markets have soared.

In the Los Angeles area alone, strikes by port truckers, which Los Angeles longshoremen honored and joined, a strike by oil refinery workers and a possible Los Angeles teachers' strike, signaled a new militancy among workers that threatened the efforts of the ILWU and the AFL-CIO to isolate and wear down the dockworkers.

The contract offers an insulting wage increase of less than three percent per year, which will be rapidly chewed up by inflation while, according to the PMA, health care changes "will foster greater efficiency, cost containment and fraud prevention for the long term." Maximum pension benefits will increase by 11.1 percent. Conditions for 7,000 essentially permanent and low-paid casual workers will not improve.

The PMA agreed to pay about $150 million in taxes imposed by the Obamacare law on so-called "Cadillac" health care plans. The tax, designed to encourage employers to provide inferior health coverage, is due to take effect in 2018.

The contract contains changes to the arbitration system that have been lauded by the PMA. Instead of four so-called "neutral" arbitrators spanning the West Coast, which the union insists have not been impartial, each of the four areas will have a three-member arbitration panel consisting of a union and a employer representative and a so-called neutral member. The union, which had been negotiating for the right to fire an arbitrator at the end of the contract, stated that this will "provide an improved system for resolving job disputes."

At the heart of many of these disputes are the swift technological changes—computerization, automation and mega-ships—that the industry has sought to implement in order to reduce labor costs while boosting productivity and profits. The blueprint followed by the ILWU over the last 13 years has been to acquiesce to these changes while paying lip service to the militant history of dockworkers' struggles. The ILWU emerged out of the four-day San Francisco general strike and 83-day shutdown of West Coast ports in 1934—led for the most part by socialists—and the subsequent 1937 break with the conservative AFL-affiliated International Longshoremen's Association.

In 2002, the ILWU gave the port and shipping operators the right to introduce computerization, slashing an estimated 30 percent of marine clerk jobs. At that time, Richard Mead, president of ILWU Local 10 in San Francisco, acknowledged, "We handle 10 times the amount of cargo that we did decades ago, but now we have one-twentieth the people." That ratio only increased with the 2008 contract.

That agreement contract conceded the unrestricted use of automation: computer-controlled ship-to-shore cranes, unmanned horizontal ground transportation and automated stacking cranes operable 24 hours a day. These measures are leading to the destruction of an estimated 40 to 50 percent of general longshore jobs. Most egregiously, the union hiring hall could now be

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bypassed on a “case-by-case” basis as management decided what workers it needed for the latest cargo-handling technology. The union hiring hall represented the greatest gain of the 1934 strike, eliminating the despised “shape up system” where dock foremen picked which (favored) workers had a job for that day.

The concession on the union hiring hall took full flight in a contract negotiated by the ILWU with the owners of the newly built EGT grain terminal in Longview, Washington in 2012, after 18 months of bitter protests. That five-year contract, which recognized the ILWU as the “sole collective bargaining” representative and contained many serious givebacks, also gave EGT sole discretion in determining which union member would be on hiring lists, a list which EGT “creates and maintains.” EGT could also hire from outside the list non-union “necessary individuals.”

The 2013 lockouts of longshoremen by Mitsui-owned United Grain terminal in Vancouver, Washington and Marubeni-owned Columbia Grain terminal in Portland, Oregon in February and May of 2013 respectively, was ended after a year and a half with the ILWU agreeing to equalize the master contract on the basis of the EGT concessions. In an effort to conceal its betrayal of the locked-out workers the ILWU launched a nationalist campaign of denouncing “foreign owned” terminals versus American-owned Temco, which signed an agreement with the union.

Also conceded in 2008 were some of the agreements on guaranteed hours and work sharing achieved in the 1970s in response to the introduction of the labor-saving containerization process.

The threat by shippers, in response to alleged union slowdowns, to redirect traffic to Canada or Mexico, or East Coast ports via an enlarged Panama Canal struck at the core of the union’s institutional interests—its collection of dues to sustain a bloated bureaucracy. The new contract extends a carrot on this issue, allowing the ILWU jurisdiction over the maintenance and repair of truck chassis. According to the May 23 *Journal of Commerce*, the leading shipping industry publication, “The PMA and ILWU know they are treading on dangerous ground here because the contract specifically excludes trucker-owned chassis from ILWU inspection and M&R.”

The article, however, points at “trucker-leased” chassis as exempt from that exclusion. It is a foregone conclusion that the ILWU will seek to expand its dues base at the expense of the brutally exploited truck-leasing drivers who are categorized as “independent contractors,” i.e., without set hours, wages or benefits. The Teamsters union has organized several protests and pickets in the Los Angeles area in an effort, coordinated with sections of the Democratic Party, to gain the franchise over these drivers.

With a shrinking dues base, the ILWU has been involved in turf battles with other unions in order to increase membership and income. In Portland, Oregon the ILWU tried to spark a fratricidal fight between workers when it sought jurisdiction over two International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers positions plugging in refrigerated containers. The same battle arose at all West Coast ports where it fought the International Association of Machinists over chassis repair.

A host of pseudo-left groups in and around the ILWU, including the International Socialist Organization, Labor Notes, Transport Workers Solidarity Committee, etc., promote the lie that the ILWU—which is little more than labor contracting business—can be pressured to defend their interests.

The experiences of workers with the unions, not only in the United States but all over the world, however, have demonstrated the exact opposite. In the face of rank-and-file opposition, the unions, rather than being pressured into fighting, draw closer to the employers and the state to suppress opposition to their lucrative relations with the corporations. The decades-long transformation of these pro-capitalist organizations into direct instruments of corporate management was accelerated by the globalization of production, for which the nationally-based unions had no progressive answer.

Recent experience of US workers has further demonstrated that the unions cannot be revived. The oil workers’ walkout in February was sabotaged by the United Steelworkers, which called out only 7,000 out of 30,000 members in the industry, and then agreed to a sellout deal, which does nothing to address workers’ demands for improved safety, work conditions and living standards.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) has presided over the creation of a low-paid, overworked workforce and is currently discussing a third-tier wage, lower than the second-tier of $15 an hour imposed by the Obama administration during its 2009 restructuring of the auto industry. Meanwhile, the auto companies have reported record profits of $76 billion since 2009.

The growing militancy of workers cannot and will not find expression through these company unions but only through the building of new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank-and-file and independent of the corporations and the big business parties. Above all, a new political perspective is needed, which is based on the international unity of the working class and the reorganization of production and trade to meet human need not private profit.

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