

Longshoremen walk out at New York/New Jersey Port

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Thousands of dock workers at the Port of New York and New Jersey walked off the job Friday, shutting the US East Coast's largest shipping port.

The surprise strike came at 10:00 am Friday without the official sanction of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). The main issue, according to ILA spokesman Jim McNamara Friday afternoon, is a dispute with the Waterfront Commission over hiring and workplace harassment. The ILA's clarification came after initially claiming it was unsure of the reason for the walkout.

Hours later, the union moved to end the job action as rapidly as it began. A statement on the ILA web site Friday evening urged dock workers to "accept orders and return to work immediately."

Terminals in New York and New Jersey have long been understaffed even as cargo volumes have soared. Over the past decade container volumes at the port have increased by 30 percent to nearly 5.8 million 20-foot containers as of 2014. Alongside this growth has been relentless speedups and longer working hours for staff offloading and transporting containers, manning entrance and exit gates and supplying trucks with road-worthy chassis.

Under these conditions, dock work at the port has become extremely dangerous. Last August, a worker was struck and killed by a piece of heavy equipment used to shuttle containers around APM Terminal in Elizabeth, NJ. In the three months following the death, a series of incidents led one worker to be hospitalized with a leg injury, another suffered burns and smoke inhalation and a third severed a hand—all at the same terminal.

Far from taking measures to ensure safety and tolerable working conditions, the ILA is complicit in the offensive by shipping companies to lower labor

costs and promote productivity gains. Under the last contract, for example, the ILA pushed through changes to workplace rules that allow one less longshoreman per work gang and reduce relief staffing.

The union's furious denunciations of the Waterfront Commission, which has intensified over the past two years, has more to do with defending its role as a labor contractor than defending job conditions. Under the current contract, new hires are to be allocated according to a formula of 51 percent for military veterans, 25 percent for ILA referrals and 24 percent for referrals from the New York Shipping Association (NYSA), which represents the employers. Under the previous contract, virtually all job applicants were referred by the union—which in an earlier period was connected to the fight against the hated shape-up system of casual labor.

The Waterfront Commission, a completely discredited political agency supposedly created to fight corruption on the docks, asserted itself in the latest rounds of new hires, holding up many of the referrals under its authority to regulate the size of the longshore workforce. After 60 years of virtual inactivity, the agency recently highlighted incidents of corruption, including a six-year prison sentence for a former ILA official convicted of extorting money from dockworkers.

Notably the NYSA has backed to a large extent the ILA in the political dispute with the Waterfront Commission. They joined with the ILA in a legislative lobbying push to pass a law in New Jersey to disband the Commission. It was ultimately vetoed by Governor Chris Christie over concerns of its legality.

The cozy relationship between the ILA and the NYSA demonstrates the hostility of the union to any genuine struggle to defend jobs and working

conditions. The basic rights of dockworkers can only be defended by breaking the stranglehold of the union and linking with port truck drivers and other transportation workers around the country.

The unions work to prevent such a united struggle by blocking any coordinated action by dockworkers on the East and West Coasts in order to facilitate the imposition of contracts favorable to the companies.

Early in 2015, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) allowed the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) to lock out 20,000 West Coast dockworkers after they had labored without a contract for nine months. Rather than call a strike, the ILWU agreed to an intervention by the Obama administration, which moved to block any work action and impose an agreement.



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