

Dockworkers' union threatens one-day strike on US East Coast

Daniel de Vries
27 February 2017

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has threatened to call a "day of action" to shut down ports along the East and Gulf coasts to protest "government interference" in hiring practices and job losses on the docks. The union is expected to soon announce the date for the work stoppage, which would also include a march on Washington, DC.

Dockworkers around the world are coming under relentless pressure on their jobs and working conditions, intensified by the global economic downturn. Over the past decade ports and terminals have committed massive investments to expand capacity and accommodate mega-size ships. US East Coast ports anticipated a bonanza from the expansion of the Panama Canal, which finished last year. However, the rapid growth in world trade, which far exceeded overall economic growth in the 1990s and early 2000s, has given way to a sharp slowdown in recent years, with little improvement on the horizon.

Longshore workers are on the front line of the drive by shipping line owners and terminal operators to recoup investment through imposing changes to work rules, forcing through cuts to wages and benefits, and increasing deployment of automated machinery. Throughout the world state-owned terminals are also being privatized.

The call for a work stoppage follows a number of recent job actions, including a one-day unsanctioned walkout in New York and New Jersey in January, 2016 and a slowdown at the Port of Charleston, South Carolina earlier this year. Internationally the situation is just as volatile. Most recently, 6,000 Spanish dockworkers have carried out protests and are preparing to strike in March to defend jobs against attacks by employers and the Spanish and EU governments.

Over the past month, informal negotiations resumed between the ILA and the United States Maritime Alliance, which represents employers, well in advance of the September, 2018 contract expiration. The main issues, according to the ILA, are ensuring local contracts are settled concurrently with the master contract and preventing full terminal automation.

In a statement last week announcing the walkout plans, however, the ILA stressed the forthcoming action was limited to appealing to Washington to end "overregulation." "It's up to the Congress to save our nation's ports. We can't do it alone," the statement read. The ILA cited policies at the Port of Charleston, South Carolina and the Port of New York and New Jersey as examples, which have caused "immeasurable damage to the nation's economy."

At the Port of Charleston, the union denounced the state-run port authority's partial use of state employees to operate cranes and perform other duties typically carried out by ILA labor at other ports. As state employees, these dockworkers in South Carolina are barred from collective bargaining under state law. A provision in the 2013 master contract encouraged state-run ports to alter port business models to allow the jurisdiction of ILA to expand. However, this "agreement" has not resulted in any significant changes.

The ILA also decried the role of the Waterfront Commission in New York and New Jersey. The Commission, set up in the 1950s ostensibly to combat graft and the influence of the Mafia on the docks, maintains authority to oversee the hiring process of longshore workers. Itself plagued by corruption, the bi-state agency began aggressively asserting its power over the past few years after a long period of dormancy. They have held up hundreds of new hires, charging that

racial minorities and women were underrepresented. The charges by the Waterfront Commission were backed by Newark, New Jersey Mayor Ras Baraka, whose hand-picked referrals failed to obtain longshore jobs. Under the last contract, the ILA and employers have a near-equal share in determining new hires. At present hundreds of jobs remain vacant or filled with temporary workers.

The dispute over who will control hiring has nothing to do with protecting the jobs, living standards and work conditions of dockworkers—of all races and nationalities—which have continued to deteriorate.

The Port of New York and New Jersey faces intense competition from its southern neighbors in Norfolk, Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia for discretionary cargo destined for the interior states. With the expansion of the Panama Canal to accommodate larger ships, these and other ports have scrambled to deepen harbors, expand terminals, and in the case of New York/New Jersey, raise an 85-year-old bridge to attract more cargo.

Yet despite these ongoing, often poorly planned and partial investments, the port and inland infrastructure remains ill equipped to process the huge surge of containers with each large ship call. Even before the largest vessels arrive on the East Coast, horrific congestion has plagued ports around the country. Twice this past week, police were forced to restrict truck traffic on the approaching roads to port terminals in New Jersey where trucks waited several hours to pick up containers.

The response by port business has been to push towards automation as a means of improving productivity. On the East Coast, terminals in Norfolk, Baltimore and Jersey City, New Jersey have already implemented semi-automated cargo handling technology. Port operators are also seeking to change work rules put in place to protect the safety of longshoremen working above, below and in-between thousands of bus-sized cargo containers.

There is growing concern among cargo owners and port interests that opposition to these attacks by longshore workers will erupt in open conflict. With many billions of dollars of cargo moving through US ports each day, the economic stakes are immense. As an indication of the nervousness, an industry group, Agriculture Transport Coalition, responded to the

planned one-day shutdown by asking Department of Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao to intervene to prevent the stoppage. The coalition cited Chao's intervention as labor secretary under George W. Bush to seek a back-to-work order for locked-out West Coast longshore workers in 2002.

In 2015, Obama's Labor Secretary Thomas Perez, just elected to the chair of the Democratic National Committee, intervened to force an end to the dispute of 20,000 West Coast dock workers and push through a concessions contract with the collusion of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

ILA officials last week addressed a rally of protesting dockworkers in Spain. The union, however, is thoroughly opposed to a common international fight against the global corporations and big businesses that defend them.

The ILA's call for the limited port shutdown is an attempt to redirect dockworkers' anger and dissipate their resistance to job losses and speedup. The union negotiated a no-strike clause into the current contract, leaving the port owners legal recourse to go after striking workers. The ILA's focus on jurisdictional issues is meant to ensure a continued dues base, not to defend workers' rights. The invocation of "overregulation" and "overreaching bureaucracies" is an embrace of the anti-working-class agenda of Trump, as ILA Vice President Kenneth Riley made clear in a statement last week. "We are protesting damage to the nation's economy that is caused by the kind of interference that President Donald Trump promised to stop," he said.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact