

The way forward for West Coast port truck drivers

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The Teamsters union ended a four-day strike by 100 truck drivers at Southern California ports on June 23. The union shut down the strike, the 15th such walkout over the last four years, without resolving any of the critical issues demanded by the drivers.

The trucking bosses, backed by the port owners and giant retail chains, have essentially expanded the cheap labor global supply chain from consumer goods factories in Asia to the container ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which process 43 percent of all cargo entering the US, worth some \$1.3 billion each day. Companies like XPO, Cal Cartage, CMI, Intermodal Bridge Transport, and others have reduced the port drivers to the status of indentured servants who bear all the costs of the “privilege” to work, including truck lease payments, maintenance, fuel, accident insurance and IRS taxes.

These corporations, like other “Gig Economy” schemes such as Uber, Lyft, and TaskRabbit, falsely label their workers as “independent contractors” or “owner operators” to skirt any payments for health benefits, unemployment or workers compensation insurance. The companies are also exempt from minimum wage, overtime laws and many workplace safety requirements.

Port truckers are compelled to work 12 to 20 hours each day. They work while sick and even avoid taking bathroom breaks for fear of losing assignments. As if these conditions were not onerous enough, many drivers report getting shorted on pay. According to a *USA Today* investigative report last month, 140 trucking companies had been accused of wage theft since 2010.

The misclassification of workers as “independent contractors” has exploded after the 2008 financial meltdown, as corporations exploited the economic

desperation of workers after Wall Street crashed the economy. This has become so prevalent that California Governor Jerry Brown modified the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit last week to include the “self-employed” making less than \$23,000 a year. The modification was made specifically to include the growing number of Californians with little more than a car and a smart phone to make money working for Uber or Lyft. At best, these workers can now receive a \$2,000 tax credit in addition to their paltry wages.

While truck drivers and other workers are determined to end this oppression, the Teamsters and other unions have no intention, let alone ability, to conduct the type of industrial and political struggle that is required. This is not because there is no popular support for such a struggle. On the contrary, a genuine fight would quickly garner the support of tens of thousands of dock workers, including an entire generation of young workers condemned to part-time and contingent labor, and millions of other workers struggling to make ends meet in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country.

The Teamsters, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the public sector and other unions, however, are tied by a million threads to the corporations and the big business politicians and the union bureaucracy fears a mass movement of the working class, which would threaten its relationship with the corporate bosses and their political servants. That is why the Teamsters and ILWU castrated the truck drivers’ struggle from the beginning, limiting picketing to token levels and urging workers to place their trust in politicians like Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia.

The strike culminated in a rally held at Los Angeles City Hall where Teamsters Local 848 officials made an

“unconditional offer” to send their members back to work and then delivered 10,000 signatures on petitions urging the mayors to prohibit trucking companies who hire independent contractors from doing business at the port.

Telling drivers to deliver petitions asking these corporate stooges for justice is like handing signatures over to a hangman. The Democratic politicians, no less than the Republicans, are the tools of the port owners, shipping companies, retail chains and big banks.

The Democratic Party spearheaded the deregulation of the trucking industry, which led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the slashing in half of real wages for truckers since the late 1970s. Six months before the close of his presidency, Jimmy Carter signed a bill sponsored by Democratic liberal stalwart Edward “Ted” Kennedy known as the Motor Carrier Act of 1980.

The measure was a fundamental revision of the Motor Carrier Act of 1935, which set standard shipping rates throughout the industry and reduced the cut-throat competition between companies, which had resulted in relentless wage-cutting for truck drivers. The 1935 measure was signed the year after the Minneapolis General Strike, led by the Trotskyist movement, which paved the way for the Teamsters to organize over-the-road drivers.

Signing the deregulation act in 1980, Carter said he was “bringing the trucking industry into the free enterprise system, where it belongs.” The following year, Reagan fired the striking air traffic controllers, inaugurating a decades-long war against the working class, which continues unabated today.

For their part, the Teamsters and the other unions responded to the deregulation of the trucking, airline and telecom industries, spurred on by the global integration of capitalist production and finance, by abandoning any resistance and transformed themselves into direct tools of the corporations and the government.

While the shipping companies certainly deserve a large share of blame for the inhuman conditions drivers face, they are just one part of a global supply chain that depends on ultra-cheap wages and exploitative conditions to maintain profits. Mega retailers and distributors such as Target, Wal-Mart and Amazon will not stand for any shipping company passing along

increased overhead costs, especially labor costs. Instead, the shipping companies are put in a race to the bottom to provide the cheapest rates possible to the retailers.

The working class in the US and around the world confronts not this or that greedy employer but an entire economic and political system—capitalism—that subordinates social need to the ever-greater private accumulation of wealth by hedge fund managers, bankers and corporate CEOs. The trade unions defend this capitalist system and have spent the last four decades suppressing the class struggle.

This only assures that the re-eruption of the class struggle will be even more explosive and draw in the broadest layers of the working class, including immigrant workers and tens of millions of others condemned to poverty level wages and sweatshop conditions. To unify every section of the working class—black, white and immigrant—in opposition to social inequality, state repression and war, new organizations of struggle and a new political perspective is needed.

Port truck drivers must take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the Teamsters, through the building of rank-and-file committees mobilize all 16,000 port truck drivers and workers throughout the Los Angeles area. This is an integral part of the fight to build a mass political movement of the working class, independent of both corporate-controlled political parties and based on the fight for socialism, to guarantee the social rights of all workers, including the right to a secure and good-paying job.

We urge port drivers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to take up this fight.



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