

Longshore union sabotages strike by 2,000 dockworkers in Vancouver, British Columbia

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Around 2,000 dockworkers began job actions at ports in Vancouver and Delta, British Columbia, Monday at 7 a.m. The workers, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), are resisting work speedup and efforts by management to atomize operations at DeltaPort and Vanterm, which could cost hundreds of workers their jobs.

But even before the strike began, the ILWU leadership was working to sabotage it. Despite the fact that talks between the union and the BC Maritime Employers Association showed no sign of progress over the weekend, and finally collapsed at 4 a.m. Monday morning, ILWU Canada issued a pathetic statement Sunday afternoon declaring that no full-scale strike would take place. Instead, ILWU Canada president Robert Ashton declared “limited and targeted job action” would be organized, and pickets would not be established at either port.

In flagrant violation of the May 10 strike mandate, when over 98 percent of the union’s 6,000 members voted to authorize a strike if contract talks collapsed, Ashton brazenly declared, “Our goal is to keep the ports open with minimal disruption to trade.” In the end, not even a token strike was organized. The ILWU instead ordered its members to merely observe an overtime ban.

This climb-down is a further demonstration of the utter bankruptcy of the unions. Under conditions in which the 2,000 dockworkers have the power to disrupt operations at a port that contributes \$5 billion to the Canadian economy every day, the ILWU is preventing any effective action.

A strike by Vancouver dockworkers would resonate with workers at other ports and other sections of workers facing similar attacks, immeasurably strengthening the port workers in their struggle.

Instead, Ashton and his fellow ILWU bureaucrats are holding out a begging bowl to management, urging the workers to place their trust in the “bargaining process,” i.e., capitulate to management’s demands.

The ILWU’s actions have emboldened the employers’ association, which has already sent signals that it wants the federal government to intervene and criminalize strike action. Jeff Scott, chair of the BC Maritime Employers Association, said, “We’re deeply concerned about the economic impact that a potential strike could have on the economic security of Canada, and the Canadian economy as a whole.”

Threats to Canada’s “economic security” have been among the favoured justifications for federal and provincial governments to ban strikes. Over recent years, dozens of anti-strike laws have been enforced by all of the established parties across Canada, from the trade union-aligned New Democrats to the Liberals, Conservatives, and Parti Quebecois. In the most recent case, Trudeau’s Liberals banned a strike by 50,000 postal workers last November, which had been waged to obtain job security, oppose increased workloads, and demand higher pay. The Liberals’ criminalization of the strike was facilitated by the postal workers’ union, which, much like the ILWU, blocked an all-out strike in favour of toothless rotating regional strikes.

The ILWU’s refusal to permit even a token strike underscores its conscious determination to prevent the dockworkers’ struggle from escalating into a political clash with the Trudeau Liberals. With federal elections set for the fall, the ILWU wants to avoid a clash that could further expose the Liberals as a right-wing tool of big business. Having endorsed the Trudeau government’s election in 2015 along with Liberals’ subsequent embrace of the US Trump administration’s nationalist and protectionist trade policies, the unions

are once again gearing up to campaign for a Liberal vote in October.

On Monday, a report revealed that Engage Canada, a front group for the unions, has released its first round of ads targeting Conservative leader Andrew Scheer for his anti-working class policies, while saying absolutely nothing about Trudeau's right-wing record, including his outlawing of last year's postal workers' strike or huge hike in military spending.

The ILWU fears with good reason that a strike by dock workers, which would involve blocking all traffic into and out of the port along with appeals for a joint struggle with other sections of the working class, would win widespread support. The conditions of mounting workloads due to management's profit-driven plans for expansion, the constant demand for more "competitive" processes and the threat of job losses due to technological changes are issues that millions of workers across Canada and internationally can identify with.

The very fact that a strike by dockworkers would resonate broadly is all the more reason for the ILWU to block it. Like unions around the world, The ILWU is terrified that a genuine struggle by dockworkers could trigger a broader movement of workers that would quickly escape its control.

Vancouver dockworkers have been without a contract for over a year after the previous eight-year agreement expired in March 2018. Last year, the completion of rail upgrades increased container cargo capacity at Deltaport by 33 percent and expanded its ability to move railcar boxes by 50 percent. Global Container Terminals, which operates both ports affected by the job action, plans to construct a fourth berth at DeltaPort to increase its docking capacity.

At Vanterm, which is the third largest port in North America by tons of cargo and Canada's largest port, GCT has spent the past 10 years pushing ahead with a \$2 billion development program to vastly expand the port's capacity.

The ILWU's sabotage of the Vancouver port worker struggle continues a pattern of betrayals. Along the North American west coast the union has presided over one concessions contract after another at ports in the US and Canada. As a result of speed-up and the use of technological innovations to intensify exploitation of the workforce agreed to by the ILWU, nine dock

workers have died at the Port of Los Angeles alone since 2008 (see: "Death of a Los Angeles dockworker").

Due to their critical role in the global network of trade and production, dockworkers have tremendous social power. A determined strike to oppose management's demands would rapidly demonstrate that the working class has the social power to bring the global operations of multi-billion-dollar concerns to a grinding halt.

The events over the past few days in Vancouver underline once again that such a struggle can only be waged independently of and in opposition to the pro-company unions. To wage a serious strike dockworkers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the ILWU bureaucrats by forming their own rank-and-file strike committees. These committees should take up the immediate tasks of stopping all work at the ports and establishing picket lines to block the moving of goods. They must also appeal for support to dock workers at other ports across Canada and internationally, and other sections of workers confronting the same attacks by big business and their government backers.

This fight is in essence a political struggle. Workers confront not just a group of intransigent employers, but an entire social class of capitalist billionaires. The ILWU's betrayal of the dockworkers struggle is the outcome of its nationalist and pro-capitalist program and its close political alliance with the Liberal government.

In opposition to this workers must advance their own independent political agenda. Central to this is the fight to establish a workers government committed to using the vast wealth accumulated by shipping giants like GCT and the other major corporations for the social needs of the vast majority, instead of the profits of a tiny super-rich elite. This includes putting the port and shipping monopolies under the democratic ownership and control of the working class.



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