

12 dead and over 750 workers infected at Southern California ports

Marko Leone
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As COVID-19 continues to break record numbers of infections and mounting death tolls in California, dock workers, shipbuilding and logistics workers at the busy ports in Southern California have been particularly hard hit in recent weeks. Currently nearly 700 workers have contracted the virus in Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, with another 60 workers infected at the NASSCO shipyard in San Diego.

Since the beginning of the year, over 35,000 confirmed cases have been reported in California every day, with Los Angeles alone seeing over 10,000 daily infections. A dozen longshore workers have died so far this year.

Eugene Seroka, executive director of the Los Angeles port, told the *Los Angeles Times* that nearly 1,800 dock workers are currently not working either due to self-isolation because of limited contact tracing or awaiting test results. Many are staying at home out of fear of contracting the virus. “We’ve got more cargo than we do skilled labor,” Seroka said.

The high numbers of cases at the ports have been the direct result of indifference to the health of port workers. Union representatives of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) have cynically claimed that port executives have been failing to report widespread outbreaks to county health officials all while keeping workers on the job.

Only one of the 12 terminals in Los Angeles has officially declared a virus outbreak of just 15 workers, despite the hundreds who are reporting infections. In reality, the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association are colluding to keep workers on the job.

The response by the Democratic mayors of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti, and Long Beach, Robert Garcia, has been to write to fellow Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom urging a faster distribution of vaccinations for

dock workers. Joined by the ILWU and other elected officials, the call for vaccinations is aimed at creating a false sense of security to keep workers on the job under dangerous conditions.

Given that the vaccine requires two doses and several weeks before immunity, and the fact that the vaccine rollout has been a disaster, the move will not provide protection to workers who have been deemed “essential” and forced to remain on the job.

LA Port Executive Director Seroka recently declared, “My heart goes out to the dock workers. I’ve heard from many of them that there have been a lot of outbreaks. There is a lot of fear.” Such comments, however, could not be more empty since management, with the backing of the union, continues to force workers to move cargo as the death toll skyrockets in the region.

The fears of local authorities, mayors, and union bureaucrats are not, however, for the lives of workers, but of the economic consequences for corporations and the financial elite due to labor shortages. The port of Los Angeles is the busiest port in the Western Hemisphere, handling some \$276 billion in cargo, according to 2019 figures.

The Long Beach seaport processes \$56.7 billion in cargo and is one of the largest employers in the region, with more than 316,000 employees in Southern California. Much of the personal protection equipment that comes into the United States is from Asia and enters through the Southern California docks. Many economies in the state and the rest of the country depend on imported goods coming through the region.

Shipyard workers at BAE Systems, Inc. and NASSCO (National Steel and Shipbuilding Company) workers in San Diego are currently experiencing a similar outbreak and surge in infections. In the last

three weeks alone, 60 positive cases have been reported at just the NASSCO shipyard in San Diego.

NASSCO and union representatives are scrambling to cover up the extent of the severity of the outbreak. Workers have also reported in social media posts that the numbers of infections are grossly underreported, and NASSCO has not done anything to limit, prevent or react to the rising cases.

In large measure, workers have been kept in the dark about positive cases at their job sites, and names of the deceased go unmentioned in the press. These include Ignacio Uribe, who died last year from COVID after he had contracted it from the NASSCO shipyard owned by General Dynamics in San Diego. Many of his co-workers never received official notice of his death or were warned of his infection. By June last year, over 100 official reports of COVID infections had occurred at the NASSCO San Diego shipyard.

Video footage of the San Diego NASSCO site has emerged of filthy bathrooms, dirty sinks with no running water to wash hands, and unkept breakrooms with appliances that have not been cleaned in months. Even the most basic sanitary measures have not been upheld.

Last year shipyard workers went on strike to oppose unsafe working conditions during the pandemic from Virginia to Maine. Wildcat strikes emerged at the NASSCO site in Norfolk, Virginia in April in response to the death of an engineer and multiple positive cases. The NASSCO shipyard employees demanded that General Dynamics and BAE provide workers with personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer) in addition to a coronavirus safety plan.

Similar strike action took place at the Bath Iron Works in Maine, with 4,300 workers walking out on the job last June. The strike emerged over low wages and cuts to health care, with an overwhelming majority of workers voting to reject the demands of General Dynamics for an expansion of outside contract labor.

Six Bath Iron Works shipyard workers had tested positive last year by July 2020, and management kept the yards open during the pandemic citing US Navy warship building as “critical infrastructure.” The International Association of Machinists (IAM) union allowed strikebreakers to work alongside union employees during the strike, collaborating with management and the political establishment under the

pretense of “saving jobs,” which was used as a justification to further erode working conditions.

There are currently 50 active cases of COVID at the Bath Iron Works site, and there have been 168 total infections since the beginning of the pandemic. COVID cases at the Ingalls Shipbuilding site in Mississippi are also on the rise.

Shipyard workers are being forced to remain on the job not because they are essential workers but because the US Navy does not want any delays in repairs on new warships as the Biden administration prepares new imperialist wars and saber rattling.

In order to prevent the further spread of the virus, to contain it and stop the strain on hospital systems, which have hung at zero percent capacity for the last month in the state, the only solution is an immediate halt to all truly nonessential production and the provision of full income for workers to stay at home and remain in safety until the virus is contained.

The WSWs encourages all dock, shipyard and other port workers to begin forming rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions and democratically run by workers themselves, to oversee safety conditions and organize collective action against the sacrifice of human life for corporate profits.

These committees must link up with nurses and health care workers, teachers and other educators to close schools and protect their lives and the lives of their students and families. For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, contact us today.



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