

Southern California dockworkers hit by COVID-19, work speedup as cargo backlog grows

Marko Leone, Anthony del Olmo
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Dockworkers, shipbuilders and logistics workers have continued to be hard hit as COVID-19 cases mount and workloads increase. In Southern California, hundreds of these workers have contracted the virus since the beginning of the year while dozens of cargo ships are being forced to anchor in the San Pedro Bay near Los Angeles and Long Beach due to increased imports and a declining workforce.

Despite falling case rates since the beginning of the year, over 300,000 coronavirus infections have been reported in California in the last month, with Los Angeles remaining a major hotspot. Deaths nationwide due to the virus have reached a grim milestone of 520,000, and so far this year dozens of longshore workers in California have also succumbed to COVID-19.

According to the Port of Los Angeles, about 800 of the 15,000-strong workforce are not on the job due to becoming infected with COVID-19 or quarantining after exposure to the virus.

The prevalence of the disease among dockworkers has led to a situation in the last several months of a record-setting backlog of cargo being held up due to a lack of enough workers to unload ships. Cargo handling has slowed dramatically in Los Angeles and Long Beach where over 20 vessels are berthed and at least 30 remain anchored in the San Pedro Bay every week, hitting a high of 113 ships either docked or anchored in mid-February. Since December, some ships have remained sitting in the ocean for up to a week. As a result, dozens of cargo ships have relocated to Oakland, California ports in the San Francisco Bay area, creating a backlog there as well.

An estimated 30,000 TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent

Unit) cargo containers remain at anchor, costing logistics companies millions of dollars per day in profits. Meanwhile, industry reports indicate growing demand by retailers who need to restock inventories as consumer spending has shifted during the pandemic away from services to the buying of goods, including online shopping.

Workers who remain on the job are being stretched thin in order to meet the demands of the port authorities in collaboration with the unions. Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Eugene Seroka noted in a recent news conference that authorities are working closely with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to bring as many workers back as possible, noting that workers are “processing cargo at record numbers, with the average worker out on the job more than 5.5 days a week. They [the ILWU] are putting every person on the job.”

The reality facing shipyard workers is that they are being forced to work under unsafe conditions despite being designated as essential workers. At the NASSCO General Dynamics shipyard in San Diego, a worker reported anonymously that the company “is meeting the very minimum set out by the CDC and OSHA, and that’s even questionable.” When asked her thoughts on the continuing COVID cases at her workplace, she stated, “The best way for the company to stop the spread is to have everyone tested and only allow them to return when [they] have a negative test. I know of another company who did this right after Christmas and caught 35 people who were positive and didn’t even know it.

“I do understand that we’re essential [workers] in our repair aspect because ships can’t be just kept off the

ocean for an undetermined amount of time ... NASSCO will keep doing the minimum, including not requiring a negative test to return to work, because that's how they are.

"The company gives the 14 days that are now California law [for quarantining after becoming infected with the disease]. NASSCO should be testing us on their dime but they haven't. I have called OSHA on this already."

Lip service about vaccinating dockworkers by California Governor Gavin Newsom and other elected officials is being used to create a false sense of security to keep workers on the job under dangerous conditions. Not only has the vaccine rollout been disastrous, but officials are moving to quickly bring more workers back into unsafe workplaces without adequate time to become vaccinated, like teachers and educators who are set to return to schools in April.

Dockworkers as well as shipbuilders across the US and internationally are being hit just as hard as their counterparts in Southern California.

The Ingalls Shipbuilding site in Mississippi has reported a slew of positive cases every week, with their most recent infection reported on March 4, despite boasting a rollout of vaccinations for older employees. Meanwhile, workers in Newport News, Virginia are being forced in the name of US militarism to refuel and overhaul the USS John C. Stennis, a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered super carrier, being serviced under terms of a recent \$3 billion contract with the Navy.

In Wisconsin, the Fincantieri docks that primarily service the cruise and tourism industry for larger liners have experienced over 300 positive cases within the last year, despite the manifestly nonessential character of these operations. Despite the high number of reported cases at the docks, Fincantieri CEO Giuseppe Bono reportedly forecast high profitability in the coming year for the company.

At Bath Iron Works in Maine, where workers are considered "essential" due to their work for the US Navy, there are currently over 50 active cases of COVID-19 and there have been 168 total infections since the beginning of the pandemic. While Bath management is lobbying for vaccines to be prioritized for their workforce, workers will be forced to continue work despite their vaccination status. In other facilities, workers will likewise be forced back to work regardless

of their vaccination status, likely before they receive both doses of the vaccine.

In Rauma, Finland a COVID outbreak involving 52 workers has taken place over the last several weeks with a total of 106 positive cases recorded since the beginning of the year. Dozens of other workers were sent home to quarantine, leading to a forced temporary closure of the shipyard.

In order to prevent the further spread of the virus, to contain it completely and stop the strain on hospital systems, requires an immediate halt to all truly nonessential production, full income for workers to stay at home and remain in safety, adequate protections for essential dockworkers and a robust testing regime.

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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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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