

Truck drivers joined by dock workers in protests at the Port of Los Angeles

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Truck drivers organized under the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union staged limited actions and pickets this past week at the Port of Los Angeles to demand the rehiring of workers fired in December 2019 and an end to the classification of drivers as independent contractors instead of employees.

For just one hour on Wednesday, truck drivers were joined by several dozen dock workers of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to halt traffic at the Yusen Terminal by refusing to service trucks targeted by the Teamsters. On Monday, a smaller group of fired truck drivers picketed in front of Universal Logistics Holdings (ULH) to demand their jobs back.

Despite the fact that truck drivers were fired in retaliation for seeking to unionize 15 months ago, the Teamsters leadership is only now staging token “Hollywood strikes,” focusing workers’ attention instead on the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which recently ruled that ULH had in fact violated several federal labor laws. The Teamsters are working overtime to isolate the truck drivers from hundreds of other workers, who are going on strike across the country.

Truckers at the port have powerful allies in the working class throughout the country, who are also entering into struggle. Truckers at Boeing in Seattle, Washington voted this week to go on strike after refusing a concessions contract that would fail to meet rising living costs. Meanwhile, Boeing executives are raking in millions in stock options while receiving bailouts from the CARES Act passed last year to inflate the pockets of the ultrawealthy.

Similar developments are taking place at the Port of Montreal in Canada where dockworkers voted overwhelmingly to reject another sellout contract by the

Maritime Employers Association. Workers there have been subjected to work speedups with the threat of slashed wages in light of cargo buildups at the port.

Elsewhere, nearly 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. in the Northeast US are in their second week of striking against steep concessions on raises, health care and pensions. Also, 1,100 coal miners on strike at Warrior Met in central Alabama have just rejected a sellout deal brokered by the United Mine Workers, in favor of continuing their strike.

Truck drivers and dockworkers across the country are demanding increased protections, sanitation and financial assurance throughout the pandemic, which the port authorities have all but ignored while dozens of their coworkers have passed away due to COVID-19. In March, port truck drivers in Los Angeles also filed a complaint with Cal/OSHA [California’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration] to investigate the lack of a COVID-19 prevention program at Container Connection, another subsidiary of ULH.

Dockworkers at the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports have been hit particularly hard by COVID-19 with record numbers of infections and deaths throughout the pandemic. Since the beginning of the year, over 700 dockworkers have contracted the virus. Another 60 have been infected at the NASSCO shipyard in San Diego. This winter, California was the center of the pandemic in the country, reporting over 35,000 confirmed cases every day, with Los Angeles alone seeing over 10,000 daily infections. Nationwide, at least a dozen longshore workers have already died this year.

Meanwhile, the Port of Los Angeles is seeking to clear up a huge backlog caused by record imports. Ships at the port sit at anchor for up to eight days on average. Consumer spending has drastically increased

compared to the first months of the pandemic, but the cargo pileup is also a direct result of the impact of the virus on workers.

Eugene Seroka, executive director of the Los Angeles port, reported last month that nearly 1,800 dockworkers were 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.

This places truck drivers and dockworkers in Los Angeles and Long Beach in a powerful position. Moreover, they have worker allies across the country that can come to their aid. But the unions at the ports are doing everything they can to prevent a serious work stoppage so the capitalists can keep making their profits.

Last year, workers carried out wildcat strikes at the NASSCO site in Norfolk, Virginia in April in response to the death of an engineer and multiple positive cases of COVID-19. The NASSCO shipyard employees demanded that General Dynamics and BAE Systems, a British multinational arms, security, and aerospace company, 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 off 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 the expansion of outside contract labor.

As workers mobilize to halt the emergence of a fourth wave of the pandemic, they are increasingly coming into direct conflict with the trade unions, which have actively collaborated with the companies to maintain production whatever the cost in infections and human lives.

The WSWS encourages all dock, shipyard and other port workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party and 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 autoworkers, health care workers, teachers and other logistics

workers in a nationwide general strike to close all nonessential production to protect the lives of the working class.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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