

Biden announces 24/7 operation at Port of Los Angeles

Patrick Martin
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President Joe Biden announced Wednesday that the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, which handle 40 percent of US imports, would begin operating on a 24/7 basis, in an effort to expedite the movement of freight and overcome the supply chain crisis that threatens both the operation of US factories and the availability of goods for US consumers.

Biden was flanked by transportation and warehousing industry officials and leaders of the Teamsters and International Longshore and Warehouse Union, as well as the AFL-CIO when he made the announcement. The use of the White House symbolized the intervention by the federal government in the privately owned shipping and warehouse industries, which has no precedent except for the issuance of strikebreaking injunctions under the Taft-Hartley Act.

The immediate concern of the Biden administration is that the supply chain crisis will force more shutdowns of US factories, as well as drying up the supply of goods for sale by retailers in November and December, the Thanksgiving to Christmas period which is the most lucrative.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, speaking to CBS News Tuesday, warned that the supply chain was “very stressed” and that “close to 100 ships” were docked off Southern California waiting to unload. But she sought to downplay the immediate impact on consumers.

“There may be isolated shortages of goods and services in the coming months. But there is an ample supply of goods. And I think there’s no reason for consumers to panic about the absence of goods that they’re going want to acquire at Christmas,” she said.

The bottleneck at the Port of Los Angeles is only the most visible demonstration of a more far-ranging crisis in the shipping of goods, mainly from East Asia to the US market. The cargo ships, most of them loaded with

thousands of 20-foot containers, are anchored off Los Angeles and Long Beach waiting their turn to dock and unload at the two ports.

The Port of Long Beach carried out a test of the 24/7 operation three weeks ago at a single terminal. The pilot program is now being extended to both ports and every dock, increasing the number of hours of operation from 112 at each port—16 hours a day, seven days a week—to 168 hours, with round-the-clock loading and unloading of cargo.

Neither the White House, the Port of Los Angeles, the shipping companies nor the ILWU has outlined what the conditions of labor will be during the longer operations. Contrary to initial press reports, there is no ban on 24/7 operations in the ILWU contract, but employers have declined to pay workers overtime rates for additional hours worked each day and on weekends.

The ILWU contract provides for two eight-hour shifts daily, with voluntary two-hour overtime at the end of each shift, plus a five-hour “owl” shift each night, starting at 3:00 a.m. All overtime work, as well as the “owl” shift and weekend work, is paid at premium rates, so employers have refused to schedule work at those times.

The union has not yet made public whether the overtime rates for additional hours worked will still apply with the new 24/7 schedule, only announcing that ILWU members will work all the additional hours on a voluntary basis. But given the record of the ILWU, in particular, and of the corporatist trade unions as a whole, the worst is to be expected.

ILWU President Willie Adams and Teamsters President James R. Hoffa appeared at the White House to listen approvingly to Biden’s remarks, along with Suzanne Clark, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; Jim McKenna, president and

CEO of the Pacific Maritime Association; Chris Spear, president and CEO of the American Trucking Association; and Ian Jefferies, president and CEO of the American Association of Railroads.

Joining them were representatives of two of the most notorious anti-union companies in the United States, John Furner, president and CEO of Walmart U.S., and Dr. Udo Lange, president and CEO of FedEx Logistics. There is little or no difference between the wages and conditions at these nonunion companies and their unionized competitors, which make use of the unions as labor police to discipline workers and enforce the dictates of the companies.

One of the main issues arising in the ongoing workers' struggles at Volvo, Dana Inc. and John Deere is the drive of the employers, with the full support of the UAW and USW unions, to compel workers to labor as long as 84 hours a week for months at a time, conditions of exploitation that hark back to the 19th century. This is what is now in store for longshore and warehouse workers.

The crisis on the docks has been greatly exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has had a devastating effect on the longshore workforce, killing at least 20 members of the ILWU, according to the union's own count, undoubtedly a gross underestimation.

Despite the emphasis on 24/7 working, the main bottleneck at the docks is not the hours worked by longshoremen. It is the comparatively antiquated character of the equipment used by US ports, as well as the organization of the entire shipping process, compared to their Asian and European counterparts.

According to one industry journal, it takes only 24 seconds to load a container at the port of Ningbo, one of China's largest and most modern facilities. The corresponding figure at Los Angeles-Long Beach is 48 seconds, twice as long.

The port of Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, the largest in Europe, operates with a centrally computerized plan of operations that tracks every container and every ship. US ports, by contrast, are divided up by rival shipping lines and freight companies, leading to what one analyst called an orchestra with "50 first-violins and no conductor." There are constant mismatches between trucks and containers, resulting in long delays in operations.

In addition, the main warehousing complexes for many large retailers are not connected by rail to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Containers for Amazon, for example, must be picked up individually by trucks and hauled 75 miles east to its central warehouse.

One industry analyst, speaking to the *Financial Times*, explained the backlog in the Asia to America traffic as follows: "You have these highly efficient ports sending these big ships in waves because of these COVID lockdowns. ... They're unloading these huge ships ... to ports that are one-third as efficient. At the end of the day they have to do a better job of getting containers out of the ports."

The White House proudly announced the commitment of six major companies to join the ports in 24/7 working, including sending trucks to pick up 3,500 extra containers each night of the week. Unfortunately, this amounts to barely half a ship, meaning that it would take more than three months to clear the backlog off Los Angeles-Long Beach, let alone process new shipments.

In the final analysis, the supply chain crisis is a demonstration of the crisis and decay of American capitalism and its relative decline in comparison to its foreign rivals, both in Asia and Europe. The ruling class, acting through the Biden administration, seeks to offset this crisis through the intensified exploitation of the working class, in which it has the full support of the corporatist unions.



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