

Biden threatens to deploy National Guard to move cargo containers at Southern California ports

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At a CNN town hall event Thursday evening, President Joe Biden revealed that he is considering using National Guard troops to ease the bottleneck at Southern California ports. In response to questioning from moderator Anderson Cooper, Biden said the plans potentially include having soldiers drive trucks from the ports to warehouses and distribution centers.

This would mean the militarization of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which handle 40 percent of US imports. It would be a direct state attack on longshoremen, truck drivers and warehouse workers, with soldiers serving essentially as scabs operating in behalf of the private owners of the ports, trucking firms, shipping companies and major retailers such as Walmart. It could also directly impact rail workers.

Biden admitted the existence of such planning in the context of a discussion of supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, rising inflation and demands by workers for wage increases. While posturing as a friend of the working man, Biden expressed in his statements on the National Guard the increasingly desperate and hostile attitude of the American ruling class to the emergence of the biggest strike movement in the US in decades, which is assuming the form of a rebellion against the pro-corporate trade unions.

“Millions of jobs are unfilled, businesses are struggling to meet demand. Is there anything you can do to either encourage people to go back to work or make jobs more attractive that they want to go back to work?” Cooper asked.

In response, Biden acknowledged the hesitancy of workers to return to work under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns for their health and that of their loved ones, as well as their disgust with poverty wages. “Wait a minute, do I want to go back to that \$7-an-hour job?” Biden said in relation to the difficulty employers are having hiring workers.

He then raised the labor shortage in connection with the “significant supply chain problem.” He noted that “in the Obama-Biden administration, all of American business” operated on the basis of the “just in time” system, which saved time and money and boosted profits. That has broken down under the impact of the global pandemic crisis.

Biden boasted of his meeting earlier this month with private port, shipping, trucking, rail and retail executives, as well as top officials from the AFL-CIO, International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), and Teamsters, who agreed to impose a 24/7 schedule at the LA and Long Beach ports. This is of a piece with the universal drive of corporations to impose back-breaking work schedules, with

12-hour days and virtually no days off, to maintain production and profits under conditions of a raging and deadly pandemic.

Despite the deal to operate the Southern California ports on a 24/7 basis, the bottleneck has not significantly eased. Following Biden’s remarks on the logjam, the following exchanged occurred:

Cooper: “Would you consider the National Guard to help with the supply chain issue?”

Biden: “Yes, absolutely, positively, I would do that. But in addition to that, what you got to do is you got to get these ships in and unloaded...”

Cooper: “So, would you consider the National Guard for trucking? For—because there’s a lot of problems—”

Biden: “Yes.”

Cooper: “—with not enough truck drivers right now.”

Biden: “But here’s—and that’s why what we’re doing now—”

Cooper: “Do you have a timetable for that?”

Biden: “Well, I had a timetable to—first of all, I want to get the ports up and running, and get the railroads and the rail heads and the trucks in port ready to move. Because I’ve gotten Walmart and others that say, ‘We’re going to move stuff off of the port, into our warehouses.’”

Cooper: “So, are you—but you’re actually talking about having National Guardsmen and women driving trucks?”

Biden: “The answer is: Yes, if we can’t move the—increase the number of truckers, which we’re in the process of doing...”

In other words, if the union bureaucracies are unable to break the logjam by imposing slave labor schedules and conditions on the workers, the federal government will bring in the military.

The reversion to the conditions of the 19th century has sparked a wave of strikes and protests against inhuman and unsafe work places and brutal work schedules, and for substantial wage increases to make up for wages lost due to decades of union-imposed concessions.

Including the strike over the summer by Volvo Truck workers, who voted down three United Auto Workers sell-out contracts before being driven back to work by the union bureaucracy, strikes have broken out in the mines (Warrior Met in Alabama); among nurses and health care workers in Buffalo, New York and Worcester, Massachusetts; by Kaiser Hospital engineers in the Bay Area; at snack and cereal giants Frito Lay and Kellogg’s; among Washington State carpenters, and most recently by more than 10,000 workers at John Deere.

In addition, tens of thousands more workers have voted for strike authorization, including 37,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers. Balloting for strike authorization is continuing in other

industries. Teachers in school districts from Pennsylvania and Ohio to California have approved strikes. Several hundred flight attendants for Piedmont Airlines, as well as SEPTA transit workers in Philadelphia are voting this week on whether to walk out.

At auto parts maker Dana Inc., the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions have kept 3,500 workers on the job under day-to-day contract extensions for months, even after workers voted down a union-backed agreement by 90 percent. The UAW and USW are seeking to ram through a new sellout deal and are desperate to prevent the Dana workers from joining the workers at Deere, for which Dana supplies critical parts, on strike.

In a growing number of these struggles, rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-company unions and supported by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, are playing a leading role.

The fear and hostility within the ruling class toward this growing strike wave was expressed openly in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial published October 17 headlined “Big Labor and the Supply Shortage.” Citing the Deere strike and other recent walkouts, the mouthpiece for the corporate oligarchy falsely identified the official unions with the growing rebellion of the workers, even while acknowledging that the Deere workers rejected a contract negotiated by the UAW. It then cited Biden’s 24/7 agreement at the Southern California ports.

The *Journal* denounced the strikes and warned that they were already costing corporations millions in profits and threatening to impact the holiday season retail trade.

With the grip of the corporatist unions over the working class visibly eroding, the ruling class is increasingly resorting to state repression and thug violence to bolster its strikebreaking operations. Last Wednesday, Deere secured a court order severely restricting picketing at its Davenport, Iowa plant, where workers had organized a mass picket to halt strikebreakers from crossing into the plant. The company is seeking a similar order at its Des Moines plant.

Strikebreakers have also been brought in against striking Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama. The deliberate isolation of the strikers by the United Mineworkers of America has left the workers open to attacks by the company’s scabs and gun thugs. Strikebreakers have hit pickets with their cars and other miners have reportedly been shot at.

Biden, who is seeking to shore up the discredited pro-corporate unions in the face of the growing rank-and-file rebellion, did not mention the strike wave at Thursday’s town hall event.

Most of his remarks were devoted to affirming reports that he has abandoned key elements of his “Build Back Better” social welfare/climate bill in the face of opposition from Wall Street and the corporate elite. He acknowledged that in internal Democratic Party negotiations, he has dropped increased income tax rates for corporations and the rich; tuition-free community college; expansion of Medicare to include dental, hearing and vision; and fines on utilities that fail to move to clean energy sources. He also confirmed that he has cut paid family leave from 12 weeks to four.

Shortly after the town hall, a White House official issued a statement seeking to distance the administration from Biden’s remarks on the National Guard, without actually denying their substance. “Requesting the use of the National Guard at the state level is under the purview of governors and we are not actively pursuing the use of the National Guard on a federal level,” the official said.

This, however, is belied by a series of prior press reports and statements by White House spokespeople.

Last Sunday, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg appeared on “Meet the Press” and was asked about deploying the National Guard to the ports. He replied, “We’re constantly going to reevaluate all our options.”

On Tuesday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki, when asked whether the administration was considering calling in the National Guard to move cargo, said, “I’m not here to take options off the table.”

The same day, the *Washington Post* reported: “White House officials have weighed whether members of the guard could drive trucks amid a shortage of operators, or if they could be used to help unload packages and other materials at ports or other clogged parts of the supply chain...

“The discussions have involved senior members of President Biden’s economic team, as well as those tasked with addressing supply chain bottlenecks at the Transportation Department, the people said. At least one private sector company has also raised the idea with the White House...

“The American Apparel and Footwear Association has sent a letter to the Biden administration touting ‘creative ideas’ to deal with the backlog, including using either the National Guard or naval ports to help unload cargo, drive trucks and take other measures.”

On Wednesday, CNN posted a similar report.

A review of the websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of the national AFL-CIO, Teamsters and ILWU found no references to Biden’s threat to bring in the National Guard. The only allusion to the corporatist agreement to operate the Southern California ports on a 24/7 basis was a post on the ILWU twitter account from Democratic Senator Alex Padilla praising Biden’s “leadership” and “the efforts of Port of Long Beach and Port of LA workers to clear the shipping backlog at two of our busiest ports.”

Padilla went on to say that he and Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein were “urging the US Department of Transportation to address remaining supply chain bottlenecks in California and across the country.”



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