

ILWU, Biden administration and employers in corporatist alliance against West Coast port workers

## The issues at stake in the US West Coast dockworkers contract

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West Coast dockworkers, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), face a contract battle this year amid supply chain issues related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the looming threat of war. The ILWU contract with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) is going to expire on July 1 this year at 29 ports in Washington, Oregon and California that account for 44 percent of US container traffic.

The PMA, which bargains on behalf of 70 terminal operators on the West Coast of the US, had asked the ILWU to postpone negotiations for one more year. Sensing that the 20,000 full- and part-time dockworkers in the ILWU are in no mood to accept a postponement, the union bureaucrats rejected a contract extension.

The contract struggle takes place under conditions where workers are facing mandatory around-the-clock work schedules, while wages are being ravaged by runaway inflation. Further fueling the anger of the workers are the profits of the major shipping companies that have skyrocketed during the pandemic, as overseas shipping rates have doubled and tripled compared to 2020 levels. Last year was a record year for profits, with Danish-based Maersk raking in \$5.9 billion in gross profits in the third quarter of 2021 alone, the best single quarter in the company's 117-year history. Total estimated profits for the carriers topped \$200 billion last year amid charges that the major shippers have colluded to further jack up rates.

However, the Biden administration in league with the shippers and the ILWU are united in their determination to prevent or severely limit any strike action or slowdown by workers at the West Coast ports, and to isolate dock workers from the struggles of workers in the US and the rest of the world. Last October the Biden administration teamed up with the shippers and the ILWU to impose 24/7 work schedules at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, which handle 40 percent of US imports.

The ILWU, which long ago ceased to represent the interests of workers in any meaningful sense, is fully on board with the corporatist plans to strangle the resistance of longshore workers and impose a contract dictated by the interests of the employers and the broader goals of US imperialism and its war drive against Russia and China.

The issues in the 2022 contract negotiations are similar to those in 2002 during the administration of President Bush. At that time this same alliance imposed a sellout contract on the dockworkers that resulted in the loss of hundreds of jobs following a PMA-organized lockout of longshoremen at the West Coast ports.

On March 2 the trade publication *Maritime Executive* reported that a coalition of 49 powerful business groups sent a letter on March 1 to the Biden administration demanding that it intervene in the contract

negotiations between the West Coast terminals and the ILWU.

The employers' alliance suggested that government intervention is necessary to prevent disruptions in the global supply chain.

In line with these concerns, a Supply Chain Disruption Task Force was appointed by the Biden administration in August 2021 headed by former deputy secretary at the US Department of Transportation, John Porcari.

The employers' letter demanded an "early and persistent" engagement to prevent disruptions in maritime trade. A similar statement had been sent by the National Retail Federation to the ILWU and the PMA. The letter stated:

*"We ask the Biden-Harris Administration to compel the parties to address these important issues now to ensure our supply chains are fully prepared to support continued economic growth and mitigate potential disruptions. Our associations support efforts by your administration to encourage and, if necessary, convene the parties to facilitate negotiations. Swift action and consistent attention to this matter can safeguard our shared economic gains and protect the progress your administration has made in addressing supply chain disruption and port congestion."*

The last ILWU contract covering West Coast ports expired in 2019, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, the ILWU agreed to a three-year extension of the previous contract.

In January 2022 alone, over 1,700 West Coast dockworkers tested positive for COVID-19, a higher figure than during all of 2021 and one of the highest rates among industrial workers in the country. In Southern California ports, more than 1 out of every 10 workers were unable to work due to COVID-19 in January. Despite this, West Coast container terminals remained fully open, and workers were pressured to work long and exhausting hours, further jeopardizing their health and safety.

An increasing number of terminals are confronting the supply chain backlog, caused in part by the reduction in the workforce due to automation. This will be one of the main issues in this year's negotiations.

However, the process of replacing workers with technological innovations, such as computers and robotics at the ports, has been an issue over many decades.

In 1960, as shipping containers became the norm, the ILWU and PMA negotiated the so-called Mechanization and Modernization agreement that resulted in a significant reduction in working hours and manpower. To protect the job security of senior workers, or A men, the ILWU, which distributes hours of work at each port, imposed divisions onto the workforce by creating two categories of part-time workers, B men and casuals. The M and M agreement was first proposed by the pro-Stalinist ILWU leader Harry Bridges.

Under the 1960 Mechanization and Modernization agreement, at West

Coast terminals, a union-administered hiring hall assigns work according to seniority lists. These lists are divided into 3 tiers. First in line are fully “registered” ILWU members, “A” workers, followed by “partially registered,” less senior “B” workers with fewer benefits. Third in line were the “casuals,” guaranteed no hours and forced to work nights and weekends for less pay and no benefits.

A few years later in 1971, California longshore workers went on strike against the continuing attacks on jobs and working hours; a work stoppage that was betrayed by the international ILWU leadership under Harry Bridges. This betrayal was part of the broader, global transformation of trade unions into direct partners with the bosses, a process vastly accelerated in subsequent years with the increasing global integration of production and the abandonment by capitalist governments of any social reformist policies.

In the contract negotiated in 2002, the PMA extracted from the ILWU the right to computerize marine terminals with no union input at all, further reducing the workforce in return for raises in wages and benefits that did not make up for the loss of income for the sacked workers and increased company profits. Along similar lines the 2008 contract gave management the right to introduce automated cranes and unmanned ground transportation.

The PMA companies, allege that they are now losing profits in competition with Gulf and East Coast ports and are therefore determined to aggressively automate the ports with new labor-saving equipment to boost labor productivity and further reduce the workforce.

Among the measures demanded by the PMA is a new round of automation and robotics that will further reduce the ILWU workforce and speed up those that remain.

Speedup and job cuts combined with indifference by employers and the ILWU to basic safety provisions (such as having clinics and ambulances at the terminals) have contributed to very high levels of injuries and deaths at the ports.

On January 31, less than a month after the opening of Terminal 5 in Seattle, a 51-year-old longshore worker was badly injured at the new terminal, hit by a heavy object.

Then on January 18 Edgar Ruiz, a crane oiler, died on the job from an industrial accident at the Port of Los Angeles’ Maersk Terminal. While the full details of what happened have not been made clear, it appears that pressure to speed up may have been a factor.

On February 15 an outside driver at the same terminal was struck and killed by another trucker. According to a report received by the WSWS, “The accident occurred on 2/15/22 Tues. night at approximately 9:15 pm. The entire terminal was shut down for the duration of the 2nd shift. Vessel, yard and rail operations were halted till the following day.

“An outside driver (over-the-road driver) was fatally struck by another driver’s truck who belong to the same company. This occurred in block N9.

“It was a gruesome scene as many of these incidences are. Hazmat as well as pressure washers were at the scene of the accident the following morning. That is 2 deaths at this terminal in the last 2 months.

“Area N9 and M9 is a highly congested area since drivers queue up in that zone waiting for a spot in the transtainer (overhead wheel crane) row and the automated yard. They need more traffic control!”

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health:

*“Workers in marine terminals and port operations have higher fatality, injury, and illness rates than other workers in the U.S. In 2017 there were approximately 98,000 workers in marine terminal and port operations in the U.S., many of them employed in longshoring work. From 2011–2017 fatal injuries occurred at an annual rate of 15.9 per 100,000 workers, a rate five times that of the U.S. workforce overall. In the same period, there were also an average of 4,916 nonfatal injuries/illnesses per 100,000 workers each year, nearly double that of the U.S. workforce overall.”*

The response by the ILWU bureaucracy to the demands by the employers and the Biden administration to end supply chain disruptions has been to insist that longshore workers not take their feet “off the gas pedal,” in other words, agree to massive speedup.

At an online meeting last month in Long Beach, California, with PMA reps and local port officials, ILWU Local 13 leader Ramon Ponce de Leon pledged cooperation with the shippers, spouting nationalist hokum. Ponce de Leon said:

“We have a resilient workforce, a very proud workforce; we are Americans; just like any other American, I’m a grandfather, have five grandkids. I need to get them toys. We have skin in the game. We’re not going to stop working. And we’re not going to take our foot off the gas pedal until America is back to its normal, consistent flow of cargo.”

In Seattle, at the January 7 opening of the new terminal in the Port of Seattle (Terminal 5), ILWU Local 19 President Rich Austin declared his complete solidarity with the profit drive of the shipping conglomerates.

“We have been working very hard in the last 5 to 6 years to increase our productivity recognizing this is a very competitive industry and boot counts per hour matter. The men and women of Local 1952 and Local 98 have really [worked] diligently to increase our move count. This has put us in a position to maintain what we have and capture more market share. I think this is an example of the hard work of the men and women of Local 19.”

He went on to compare the efficiency of job assignments by the joint ILWU-PMA dispatch halls to the trading floor of Wall Street. To counteract the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Austin indicated that many casual workers are being hired. “[W]e are confident we are going to meet the needs of the industry,” he added.

In this same nationalist and class collaborationist vein, the ILWU leadership has completely solidarized with the reckless war drive of the Biden administration and NATO against Russia over Ukraine, announcing that it would no longer work Russian cargo or Russian vessels, inbound or outbound. “With this action in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, we send a strong message that we unequivocally condemn the Russian invasion,” said ILWU International President Willie Adams. “West Coast dockworkers are proud to do our part to join with those around the world who are bravely taking a stand and making sacrifices for the good of Ukraine.”

The reckless US drive to war, embraced by the ILWU, is being used by the Biden administration to insist that workers accept drastic cuts to living standards and working conditions for the sake of “national unity.” Of course, no demands are being placed on the giant corporations that they sacrifice their profits.

To take forward their fight, dockworkers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and completely independent of the pro-management unions. These committees will democratically discuss and decide on demands based on the needs of workers to decent living standards and safe and health working conditions, not on the profit demands of the shippers.

The struggle of US dockworkers takes place alongside the growing militancy by workers in the US and internationally. This past year has seen strikes by workers including Massachusetts nurses, Alabama coal miners, Frito Lay, Nabisco and Kellogg’s workers, Chicago teachers and autoworkers at John Deere and Volvo Trucks. Currently over 4,000 Minneapolis Public School teachers are in the second week of strike.

In opposition to the nationalist demagoguery of the ILWU-PMA-government alliance, West Coast dockworkers need to reach out to their brothers and sisters around the world, in the first place, Canada and Mexico.

The West Coast ports of Washington, Oregon and California are part of a network of ports that include Canadian and Mexican ports, joined together by a gigantic railroad network that links all three nations

(Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern). That network can be used by the shipping companies to direct container ships to Mexico, as well as to ports in British Columbia on the West Coast of Canada, where workers are nominally represented by the ILWU, to undermine the struggle of ILWU members in the US. ILWU members in Pacific Canada are working under a separate eight-year deal rammed through in 2019 after the union intervened to sabotage strike action.

It is imperative that West Coast longshore workers reach out to their fellow dockworkers in those countries, map out, and organize a joint struggle to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions, around a basic list of demands, including:

- No layoffs!
- Wage increases to catch up to past inflation and for anticipated inflation during the life of the contract,
- Consolidation of the three tiers of workers, equal pay for equal work. Full benefits for all workers.
- Sliding scale of hours and wages to compensate for technological improvements.
- Improved safety conditions, no speedups, adequate safety equipment and high level of safety training; clinics and ambulances at every terminal. Workers must have the right to halt production if conditions are unsafe.

To find out more about building rank-and-file committees, workers should contact the WSWs.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**