

US West Coast dockworkers prepare for summer battle

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Are you a dockworker? Contact us to discuss the upcoming contract struggle.

In less than eight weeks, the labor agreement between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), which covers over 25,000 dockworkers at 29 ports on the West Coast, will expire on July 1. Official negotiations between the ILWU and the PMA are set to begin this Thursday.

The struggle facing dockworkers takes place in the midst of runaway inflation, rising COVID-19 infections, a global supply chain crisis and increasing industrial action and working class protests around the world, including by dockworkers. At the same time, workers confront the reckless drive by the Biden administration for a direct military confrontation with Russia.

A strike by dockworkers at the Los Angeles-Long Beach and other West Coast ports would have an instant impact on the already fragile supply chain, and would inspire far broader sections of workers to join the fight against the erosion of their living standards and working conditions. For this reason, the Biden administration is colluding with the ILWU to block a strike if it can.

As ILWU International President Willie Adams stated in an October 2021 White House meeting with Joe Biden to address supply chain issues, “For the first time in our union’s history, the President of the United States invited the ILWU for a meeting at the White House,” he said.

Since then, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has been facilitating talks between ILWU leaders, US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh in a bid to prevent a strike.

The Biden administration is frightened a strike by dockworkers would quickly break free from the union’s control and inspire other workers to oppose the government’s demands that workers pay for the global economic crisis and the massive increase in military spending. A strike would also deal a significant blow to the White House’s war plans.

The power of this strategic section of the working class

was acknowledged by ILWU President Adams who said port workers “are the artery in the supply chain,” especially given the fact that the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports handle 40 percent of US imports. Any work stoppage or slowdown would prove to be detrimental to the ruling class’s pursuit of unhindered profits. It would, moreover, immediately turn into a direct political struggle against the Biden administration, both corporate-controlled parties, the courts and all the repressive institutions of the capitalist state.

Last year, the Biden administration created an industry supply chain advisory group, a corporatist labor-management-government body to run the docks 24/7 and beat back the resistance of dock and other logistics workers to speedup, unbearable work schedules and eroding paychecks.

ILWU President Adams selected ILWU Coast Committeeman Frank Ponce De Leon to be the ILWU representative of the government advisory group, which also includes representatives of the PMA, the trucking and railroad sectors, major retailers and government officials.

This orchestrated effort is aimed at not only preventing industrial action by dockworkers; it is a deliberate and desperate attempt by the state, the corporations and corporatist unions to keep the struggle isolated from other sections of the working class who are also ready to fight capitalist exploitation.

Like dockworkers, rail workers in the US and Canada also play a prominent role in the supply chain and are willing to strike against being overworked, understaffed and underpaid. When 17,000 BNSF rail workers threatened to strike against a new punitive attendance policy imposed by the Warren Buffett-owned railway, a federal judge issued an injunction to block the strike, citing supposed “national interest” concerns over supply chain disruptions. The Teamsters-affiliated Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers dutifully imposed the government’s strikebreaking injunction.

The same is true for the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers, the United Food and Commercial Workers and other unions, which have colluded with the corporations to keep the factories running despite the spread of deadly COVID infections.

Port workers will face no less an enemy in the ILWU, which has a long record of collaborating with the port bosses in the destruction of jobs, casualization of the workforce and the creation of lower pay and benefit scales for younger workers. If the ILWU and the Biden administration had their way, dockworkers would be forced to accept another concessionary contract.

But workers on the ports will have something to say about that. However, everything depends on the independent initiative of workers themselves and the organization of rank-and-file committees to defeat the treachery of the ILWU and defy strikebreaking threats by the Biden administration. Dockworkers have a long history of militant class struggle, including the 1934 San Francisco general strike. These powerful traditions must be revived but adapted to the global reality of the 21st century.

Rank-and-file committees must fight for an all-out strike on July 1 and oppose any contract extensions by the ILWU and any government intervention with mediators or anti-strike measures. Rank-and-file workers should communicate with each other and organize around the following nonnegotiable demands:

- No layoffs! Hire thousands of new workers, with full wages and benefits, to end exhausting schedules and job overloading.
- Substantial wage increases to make up for past ILWU-backed concessions and monthly Cost-of-Living Adjustments to protect workers from surging inflation.
- Consolidation of the three tiers of workers, the restoration of the principle of equal pay for equal work by bringing all workers to top wages and benefits.
- Sliding scale of hours and wages to compensate for technological improvements and prevent layoffs.
- Workers' control of the production process to ensure safety, prevent speedup, and protect workers from the ongoing COVID pandemic. Provide all workers with adequate safety equipment and a high level of safety training. Clinics and ambulances must be located at every terminal and workers must have the right to halt production if conditions are unsafe.

The port and ship owners are making more than enough to pay for these demands. But history has shown that nothing can be won without the most determined mass struggle. That is why a strike on the ports must be combined with an appeal to mobilize the widest support for the struggle from workers throughout the West Coast, the US and internationally.

First, port workers must spread their struggle to mechanics, delivery drivers, ship crews, warehouse workers and many other workers integral to the supply chain who share the same issues and are ready to take up the struggle.

Dockworkers workers should also appeal to Stanford, Kaiser and Cedars-Sinai nurses, striking Chevron oil workers in Richmond, Los Angeles County and other workers entering fights throughout the West Coast.

The shutdown of the ports in California, Oregon and Washington state must be linked up with other port workers worldwide to prevent corporations from shifting operations to the Gulf of Mexico or the East Coast as they have stated repeatedly in the press.

To succeed, dockworkers must reject the nationalism of the ILWU, including its anti-Russian and pro-war policies, and adopt an internationalist perspective. Within these past few months, workers from all around the world have waged tremendous struggles against inflation and their inability to afford a decent living.

Dockworkers and millions of other workers in Sri Lanka have protested to demand the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his administration for their implementation of IMF-backed austerity measures.

In Peru, cargo carriers, agricultural workers, transport workers and many others protested and blocked roads for weeks to raise their demands against inflation and out-of-control fuel prices.

Spanish truck drivers similarly blocked ports and roads through a three-week nationwide strike in order to protest against rising fuel prices caused by the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Port workers, who are connected by a thousand threads to the international economy, and hence, the international working class, must work wholeheartedly and effectively with workers on a worldwide scale.

Only an international approach to international problems will pave the way for a successful struggle against rising inflation, the danger of war and attacks on the living standards of workers by the capitalist class.

To do this, workers must break free from the shackles of the treacherous trade unions and form their own rank-and-file strike committees created, managed and supervised by the workers themselves.

For more information about rank-and-file committees, contact us by filling out the form below:



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