

Biden, port officials and the ILWU close ranks as West Coast dock contract expiration looms

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24 May 2022

Are you a dockworker? Contact the World Socialist Web Site to tell us about conditions at your port and what you want in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

With five weeks until the expiration of their contract on July 1, 25,000 dockworkers face an intense struggle against the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) at 29 ports on the West Coast. Talks between the PMA and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) began in San Francisco on May 10, but last Friday, the union requested a suspension of talks with the PMA, as reported by the Journal of Commerce (JoC).

As of this writing the ILWU has not confirmed that they have requested a suspension of talks, although it does appear to be the case.

Since last year, the Biden White House has been working behind-the-scenes with the ILWU leadership and the PMA to ensure the ports remain open and dockworkers stay on the job, with or without a contract. The Biden administration is well aware that any strike action by dockworkers would immediately reverberate across the country and internationally, throwing already strained global supply chains into further chaos.

Roughly 60 percent of all imports coming from Asia are handled by ports on the West Coast, such as Los Angeles, Long Beach, Seattle-Tacoma and Oakland. A strike after the expiration of the current contract would also come in the middle of the summer, traditionally the busiest months on the ports.

A strike by workers at these critical ports would not only severely impede the accumulation of profits, it would also inspire broader sections of the working class, such as long-haul truckers, warehouse and logistic workers, to join in the struggle against their shared continued impoverishment in the face of spiraling inflation and deteriorating working conditions.

It would also throw a wrench into the well advanced US-NATO war plans with Russia which threaten the entire planet with nuclear annihilation. A recent Army War College Report noted the strategic significance of the ports in US war plans. The report noted that “90 percent of military cargo is transported by sea.”

In its report on the request to suspend negotiations, the JoC said it was informed months ago by a member of the “port envoy task force” created last June by the Biden administration that “slowdowns or employer lockouts,” unlike in previous negotiations, “will not be tolerated this year.”

The Biden administration created the “Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force” last June. The task force is headed by current Transportation Secretary and former naval intelligence officer Pete Buttigieg. Working under Buttigieg with a focus on ports and trucking is “port envoy” John D. Porcari, who was appointed by Biden to the newly created position last August. Porcari was the Deputy Secretary of Transportation under Barack Obama and the Chairman of the Maryland Port Commission before that.

Less than two months after his appointment last August, Porcari toured the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach with California Governor Gavin Newsom (Democratic) and ILWU International President Willie Adams. In October, the Biden administration struck a deal with the ILWU and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to operate these facilities 24 hours a day, seven days a week in order to work through massive levels of congestion caused by supply chain snarls.

Standing side by side with Newsom and Adams last November, Porcari said he was “grateful” for “California’s partnership.” He thanked the Democratic politicians and the trade unions for their “focus to produce outcomes that will

reduce congestion, improve operations and set us on a sustainable path for the future.” By “sustainable future” Porcari means a profitable future for the corporations by working the dockworkers as hard as possible.

Joining Porcari, Adams and Newsom is Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti. In an interview with the *American Journal of Transportation* this past March, the Democratic mayor offered his “diplomatic services” in the upcoming contract talks, while at the same time revealing that he has been in coordination with Buttigieg and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh “from the start.”

“We’ve been seeding the ground” ahead of the talks, Garcetti told the publication.

A day before JoC reported that the ILWU was seeking to suspend contract talks, California Senator Dianne Feinstein released a statement warning that a “work slowdown or stoppage later this year would exacerbate global supply chain disruptions.” Feinstein urged the PMA and ILWU to “reach a fair, long-term agreement,” adding that she, like Garcetti, was “available to provide any assistance that may be useful in resolving this situation.”

The ILWU is determined to play its appointed role in keeping dockworkers on the job and forcing through a pro-corporate agreement. Last month, Adams and Coast Committeeman Frank Ponce De Leon sat for an “unprecedented” 22-minute interview with Gene Seroka, executive director of the Port of Los Angeles.

The purpose of the event was to signal unity between the ILWU and the employers. “Everybody needs to tone it down and stop all the rhetoric,” Adams said. “The ILWU and the employers have been negotiating since the 1930s. There are adults on both sides of the table. Sometime in May, we are going to sit down. We are going to get an agreement.”

Significantly, the ILWU officials also raised the possibility of moving towards 24/7 operations on a permanent basis, pointing out that this was already allowed in the current contract. Such a move would have implications far beyond the ports, as it would compel those further down the supply chain, including warehouse workers, truckers, railroaders and others, to increase their own pace of work to keep up.

However, the ILWU signaled that it would leave the ultimate decision on this to the ports. “All we offer is our labor,” Adams said. “We don’t make business decisions.”

But despite this friendly chat, both the ILWU and the PMA face serious difficulties in getting a contract passed, given the growing opposition of dockworkers and the intransigence of the PMA. In a separate interview with Bloomberg Radio last week, Seroka, speaking on the

possibility of a strike or slowdowns by dockworkers said, “[w]e have implemented measures to make sure that we keep some fluidity in the movement of cargo.”

He added, “[d]ockworkers are still going out in record numbers and will continue to do so,” a reference to high turnover largely as a consequence of the pandemic which has killed dozens of dockworkers.

Seroka concluded, “I don’t expect a slowdown by [the union]. For us, we’re certainly better prepared to address any type of scenario than maybe we were a year ago.”

In the event that a strike does take place, ports around North America, including in Canada and Mexico, are also preparing to act as scab labor by taking in shipments originally bound for the US West Coast. Last month the port of Savannah, more than 3,000 miles away from Los Angeles on Georgia’s Atlantic Coast, did record business as companies redirected shipment eastward to avoid crowded West Coast ports.

In an appearance on Bloomberg television, Port of Long Beach Executive Director Mario Cordero said he had “confidence that the two parties know what’s at stake here” and that “they will resolve their differences within a reasonable time.” However, he said that it was highly unlikely that an agreement would be reached before the July 1 expiration date. “We may be looking to a couple of months thereafter. On that front, I’m optimistic.”

The next five weeks are critical. Dockworkers are in a powerful position, but they must develop their own independent initiative to prepare themselves for a showdown not only against the PMA, but the Biden administration and the pro-corporate ILWU bureaucracy.



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