Business groups demand Biden administration intervene to prevent any work stoppage on West Coast ports

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With the contract between over 22,000 West Coast dockworkers and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) set to expire in three weeks, the Biden government, in coordination with the PMA and International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), is conspiring to prevent a strike and to force through a sell-out contract.

Terrified at the prospect of a dockworkers strike shutting down large sections of US supply chains, a group of large business associations led by the US Chamber of Commerce wrote a letter on June 8 to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, demanding the White House "engage in the negotiations" in order to ensure "backups, delays, and inflationary costs are avoided."

The letter warns that, "...even a relatively brief port slowdown or shutdown would compound current supply chain challenges and cause long-lasting damage to consumer confidence and American businesses."

Signatories of the letter included the Retail Industry Leaders Association, which represents brands such as Target, Lowe's, Best Buy and Walgreens, the American Apparel Footwear Association and the Travel Goods Association.

The companies demanding no work stoppages on the docks represent a substantial cross-section of the ruling class and the interests of Wall Street. With Shanghai reemerging from a brief two-month lockdown after successfully containing the Omicron variant, US companies are eager to keep dockworkers on the job and unloading inbound cargo from Asia, even as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the US.

In the letter to the White House, the business consortiums expressed "concern" that so-called "negotiations" between the ILWU and PMA were temporarily suspended at the end of May by the ILWU. These talks have since resumed, in secret.

A major point of contention in the ongoing contract talks between the ILWU, the PMA and the businesses represented in the letter, are alleged shortfalls in US port productivity.

In a letter sent three months ago by the same business groups, again urging the Biden administration to intervene, they bemoaned the alleged lack of "productivity" at US ports, writing that it was of "paramount importance" that the new contract included "targeted investment...for infrastructure modernization and automation."

The develop of containerization and other new technologies has dramatically reduced shipping costs, making possible the globalization of production and supply chains. Harnessed to the profit motive, this has also been used to make redundant vast sections of the workforce on the docks, which now handle far more cargo with a fraction of the workforce of previous generations. Coming as it does amid massive shortages and supply chain issues and a tightening labor market which has emboldened workers to press for wage increases, the demand for the "modernization" has a similar character.

In the current "negotiations" the ILWU and its President Willie Adams have claimed to dockworkers that they will not accept a contract that includes increased automation.

But over 50 years of negotiations between the PMA and ILWU have proven that is not the case. Beginning with the October 18, 1960 Mechanization and Modernization Agreement, designed by then-ILWU president Harry Bridges, the contract, in a practice that would be replicated by trade unions such as the United Auto Workers, oversaw massive job losses and wage cuts by dividing workers into tiers: A, B, and Casual, with casual workers unable to claim any benefits in the M&M agreement.

According to the Houston Chronicle, in 2018 'Longshoremen overall earned an average hourly wage of $24.98 an hour," however, the "bottom 10 percent of longshoremen made under $39,671 a year, and the top 10 percent made more than $134,653 annually. The ILA set the starting pay rate for longshoremen entering between October 2017 and September 2018 at $22.00 an hour, while the ILWU offered those starting between July 2017 and late June 2018 $29.49 an hour."

While dockworkers are constantly vilified in the capitalist press because some members, through sacrifices made in current and past struggles, are able to eke out a respectable living, the PMA reported profits within the industry exceeded $150 billion last year. At the same time, the PMA only paid out $2.26 billion in

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wages and $1.55 billion in benefits, meaning a 20 percent raise for dockworkers would translate to $800 million, or a little more than 0.5 percent percent of the PMA's profits.

For over a year, the Biden White House, through the "Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force," and Port Envoy John Porcari have been conspiring with ILWU president Adams and Coast Committeeman Frank Ponce De Leon to ensure there are no disruptions on the ports when a new contract is forced through. Both of the union bureaucrats visited the White House last October to solidify their alliances against rank-and-file dockworkers.

What has been going on in San Francisco since last May between the ILWU and PMA, in secret, behind closed doors, cannot truthfully be described as "negotiations" between two parties with opposite interests.

Through the ILWU, and the trade unions as a whole, the Biden administration is seeking to develop a corporatist framework in which the labor bureaucracy will enforce the dictates of management and Wall Street without having to resort to police-state measures. This is why the Democratic Party has been so heavily involved in negotiations.

However, if a contract agreement is not reached by July 1, there is a possibility that the PMA, as it did in 2002, will lock out dockworkers prior to the contract expiration and then appeal to the Biden government through the Taft-Hartley Act to file an injunction and coerce workers to labor without a contract.

The act allows the president to obtain a federal court injunction which declares strikes illegal for a "cooling off" period of 80 days.

Already there are sections of the ruling class, anticipating that dockworkers will not accept the upcoming sellout, that are calling on Biden to prepare this option if a contract cannot be forced through by the ILWU.

In a June 8 interview, Michael LeRoy, Illinois professor and former advisor to George W. Bush, suggested that the Biden administration begin laying the groundwork to invoke the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act to force dockworkers to remain on the job without a contract.

LeRoy, who notably advised Bush on the use of Taft-Hartley during the 2002 lockout of longshoremen by the PMA, argues that under the guise of a "national emergency" he would "advise" Biden to "start thinking about forming a board of inquiry in the next week or two."

"When a strike or lockout happens on the West Coast," LeRoy said, "it has a fast and crippling impact on many supply chains. Therefore, it's extremely important to settle the dispute."

Even prior to the passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947, US presidents have routinely intervened on the side of capital against labor to force through pro-company deals. In the 1934 San Francisco general strike, Democratic president Franklin Delano Roosevelt repeatedly intervened to try and force through a deal, with his advisors at one point suggesting he station a battleship in the harbor and turn its guns on workers.

During the 1948 longshore strike, Democratic President Harry Truman used the law to obtain 12 injunctions against striking West Coast longshore, and railroad and packinghouse workers, who were also on strike.

During the 1971 dockworkers strike Republican President Richard Nixon likewise obtained court orders through Taft-Hartley to force striking longshoremen back on the job along the Pacific Coast and the Port of Chicago after a 98-day strike.

While business interests demand Biden intervene, it is imperative that dockworkers establish rank-and-file committees to defend their own independent initiative from both the ILWU bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. Workers should begin discussing what they will do, if and when they are ordered to work without a contract.

There is massive support for dockworkers throughout the working class. Any strike action by dockworkers would serve as a beacon to other workers who face the same threats to their livelihoods, whether it is increased speed-up, decreasing wages in the face of skyrocketing and far from "transitory" inflation, or the ongoing risk of succumbing to the COVID-19 virus, which has killed over one million in the US including at least over 70 dockworkers.

Dockworkers in the US have allies throughout the world. In Hamburg, Germany, dockworkers are ready to strike, but just like in the United States, they are hamstrung by the corporatist trade union. In the case of the German dockworkers, the Verdi union, in an attempt to allow workers to "blow off steam," is only calling for one day of isolated strikes across five ports for "a few hours."

Even this limited action has shot lightning bolts of fear through the German ruling class. In a statement by the German equivalent of the PMA, Ulrike Riedel, the German Association of German Seaport Companies (ZDS) negotiator, called the limited strikes, and the warning of potentially more, "irresponsible and unacceptable."

One shipowner told the German newspaper *Hamburger Abendblatt*: "If it comes to that, we'll have a super meltdown in Hamburg."

A retired west coast dockworker recently told the *World Socialist Web Site* that while company "profits are at an all-time high" and dockworkers "worked through covid to move cargo," the "cost of living has gone up a lot."

"There is much more at stake here than just our contract," he said, noting that it was important for "working class people all over the world."

The World Socialist Web Site *is prepared to assist dockworkers in this crucial task. All dockworkers interested in fighting against the conspiracy between the Biden government, the PMA and the ILWU are encouraged to contact us today.*

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