

With contract expiration for dockworkers looming, Biden makes warmongering speech at Los Angeles ports

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With the contract expiration of 20,000 West Coast dockworkers rapidly approaching at the end of the month, President Joe Biden made an unannounced visit to the Port of Los Angeles last Friday. The speech, which attempted to focus popular anger over inflation against America's foreign rivals, was an indication of the deep crisis that American capitalism confronts.

Biden referred to inflation, which reached 8.6 percent in the US last month, as "Putin's price hike" three times throughout the speech, attempting to blame Russia for the crisis, which is largely the result of the US government's continuous corporate and financial bailouts since 2008. This has been exacerbated by US-led sanctions against Russia following the NATO-provoked war in Ukraine.

He also launched a broadside against foreign competition in the shipping industry. He called on Congress to "crack down on... foreign-owned shipping companies" for "raking in, just last year, \$190 billion in profits—a seven-fold increase in one year." Biden claimed that upon learning that "nine major ocean line shipping companies" had formed "three consortia," it made him "viscerally angry." "If [I] had the person in front of [me], [I'd] want to pop them," he said.

The fact that Biden made this sudden trip to the port, following the conclusion that day of the Summit of the Americas, which was also held in LA, indicates the high degree of seriousness with which both the White House and the American capitalist elite view the situation on the docks.

Driven by the skyrocketing cost of living and massive number of deaths due to official indifference to the pandemic, the coming weeks are expected to see the emergence of a "hot summer" of class struggle, involving significant strikes and social protests by workers around the world. Any show of opposition from port workers, especially strike action, would not only encourage resistance from workers all over the country, it would also shut down a significant section of the US economy. The West Coast docks handle goods that account for roughly 9 percent of US GDP.

Already, dockworkers have carried out warning strikes in German ports to demand wage increases above inflation, and truckers are striking in South Korea, bringing that country's ports to a standstill. These developments are significantly impacting global supply chains in the auto industry. Later this month, rail workers in Britain are scheduled to conduct a series of nationwide

strikes, the largest since the 1980s.

The Biden administration is fully prepared to use state repression against opposition from dockers. In the postwar era, the White House had repeatedly invoked the Taft-Hartley Act and other strike-breaking laws against dockworkers, including in 1948, 1971 and 2002. In the last instance, then-President George W. Bush issued a federal injunction even though the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) had locked out the workers.

Indeed, Biden had briefly considered sending the National Guard to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach last fall to work through massive shipping backlogs which left supertankers anchored offshore for weeks, waiting to dock and unload. Earlier this year, with the silent assent of the Biden administration, a federal judge issued an injunction to prevent a strike by workers at the BNSF railroad against a punitive new attendance policy. The judge said the strike would disrupt supply chains and threaten the "public interest."

In an attempt to avoid a direct political confrontation with militant dockers, the Biden administration is promoting a corporatist framework, bringing together the government, the PMA and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to prevent a strike and enforce a sellout contract. During his trip to Los Angeles, Biden met with Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka, Port of Long Beach Executive Director Mario Cordero, Democratic politicians such as Senator Alex Padilla and ILWU officials.

After Biden's speech, Gene Seroka told the *Business Insider*, "We're working on a daily basis with the White House, the cabinet members and key policy staff. Those folks are also keeping a keen eye on labor negotiations." He emphasized that while he did not see a contract being completed by July 1, this was no cause for concern. "Personally, from my vantage point, I do not see a strike on the horizon."

"Both sides are eagerly working at the table," Seroka added, saying that there has "been great attention from the president himself, the Biden-Harris administration, the cabinet level... everybody is working on the ground here."

Last year, the ILWU spared Biden the embarrassment of mobilizing the National Guard by agreeing to a deal to operate the ports 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The union's eagerness to play the same role in the contract talks was indicated by the fact that the

ILWU has parroted much of the talking points which Biden made on Friday. The ILWU has also thrown its weight behind the hysterical anti-Russian campaign being whipped up by the government and corporate media, declaring earlier this year that it would refuse to handle cargo from Russian-owned ships at its ports.

Biden was introduced Friday by ILWU official Sal DiCostanzo. Mindful of the widespread distrust among workers for the union bureaucracy, DiCostanzo was presented as a rank-and-file ILWU member. In fact, he is a member of the executive board of Local 13 and is highly politically connected, sitting on the Policy and Steering Committee of the Center for International Trade and Transportation (CITT), an industry think tank. He also met with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg when the latter visited the port this January.

DiCostanzo thanked Biden for his “courageous leadership here and abroad” and his “commitment to strengthening the role of labor within the economy and for upholding justice and democracy at every opportunity.” He pointed in passing to the disastrous impact of the pandemic on port workers, acknowledging that “many brothers and sisters [have fallen] ill, some severely and some with lasting consequences,” and that “too many paid the ultimate price.”

The ILWU official made no mention of Biden’s abandonment of any measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, which continues to threaten the lives and health of dockworkers.

One element in Biden’s speech which came through particularly clearly was the degree to which the docks are seen as central to the war planning of American imperialism. They are critical for moving materiel and equipment to war zones such as Ukraine, and, in the near future, eastern Asia. Shipping itself is seen as a “national security issue” and a theater of conflict which the US is determined to dominate.

The choice of venue for his speech—the deck of the World War II-era battleship USS Iowa, with massive supertankers docked in the background—was clearly meant to send a message that the US is prepared to use force to control global supply chains. No doubt it was also meant to evoke the semi-mythical “arsenal of democracy” of World War II, in which the United States’ industrial superiority was a significant factor in the defeat of the Axis powers.

Biden’s attacks on foreign-owned shipping companies reflected the fact that US-owned shipping companies have fallen far behind in international competition. According to the most recent figures from this April, only one of the top 30 shipping lines by tonnage, Matson, is US-owned, with only 0.3 percent of global market share. By comparison, China has six of the largest shipping companies, South Korea has four, and Europe has five.

On the Monday following Biden’s speech, Congress passed the Ocean Shipping Reform Act of 2022 in a bipartisan vote. The act is a protectionist measure aimed at increasing US exports, particularly in agriculture, by compelling carriers to carry US goods.

Notably, in his speech Biden boasted of the appointment of retired Army General Stephen Lyons as “Port Envoy,” a position previously held by John Porcari, who was appointed by Biden last

year. The appointment of Lyons, a veteran of multiple US wars, signals the well-advanced plans for World War III being mapped out at the highest levels of the government. These preparations require keeping the ports operating at full capacity to accommodate US imperialist operations. In thanking Lyons for taking the position, Biden boasted that as the head of the US Army Transportation Command, Lyons moved “tens of millions of billions of tons of things... from little things like tanks and aircraft and all of that.”

The speech demonstrated that a major calculation behind the drive towards war is to use military conflict as a means of deflecting outwards the vast social tensions within the United States, not only within the working class but within the ruling elite itself. In one section of his speech, Biden referred to right-wing Republicans who have seized on the issue of inflation to distract from the January 6 hearings, as his “MAGA [Make America Great Again] friends.”

Notwithstanding the intricate and well advanced planning by the Biden administration, there is extreme nervousness in ruling circles that this may be inadequate to deal with the explosive growth of the class struggle. The same week as Biden’s trip several business groups led by the US Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to the White House demanding that it “engage” in contract negotiations between the ILWU and the PMA in order to prevent any work stoppages or slowdowns at the ports, which account for some 9 percent of US Gross Domestic Product.

In a separate letter sent last week, over a dozen Republican senators and several House members, including Senate Minority Whip John Thune (South Dakota) and Senators Mitt Romney (Utah) and Marsha Blackburn (Tennessee), joined 49 business associations in demanding Biden intervene on behalf of Wall Street to force through a sellout contract.

In their letter, the Republican politicians urged Biden to “begin working with the ILWU and PMA to ensure their crucial work continues without interruption.” The Republicans asked the White House “to keep stakeholders and Congress informed of any progress or setbacks in negotiations. We understand that Secretary of Labor [Marty] Walsh is monitoring these negotiations, though we are not clear about any follow-up from the Administration.”



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