

As West Coast dockworkers contract set to expire this week

ILWU and PMA issue joint statement announcing no “work stoppages or lockouts”

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After over six weeks of closed-door talks between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), it appears the contract for 22,000 West Coast dockworkers will expire this week without a new agreement having been reached.

The current deal is set to expire at midnight on July 1. However, the ILWU has made clear that its intention is to keep workers on the job past the deadline, making a mockery of the principle of “no contract, no work.” The ILWU has been in discussions with the PMA and the Biden administration behind the backs of rank-and-file dockworkers to ensure the ports remain open and cargo flowing, even if there is no contract.

The Biden administration and corporate America as a whole are deeply concerned that a strike would not only disrupt fragile supply chains and bring much of the American economy to a halt; it would also have a galvanizing effect on workers across the country, who are fighting against the spiraling cost of living. One member of Biden’s port envoy task force put this frankly when he told an industry publication that “slowdowns or employer lockouts [would] not be tolerated this year.”

The ILWU itself had requested a suspension of talks in May, which indicates that the PMA is playing hardball and demanding sweeping concession on automation, working hours and other areas, but the union has not even bothered to call a strike authorization vote. In fact, in a joint statement with the PMA released two weeks ago, the ILWU declared that it had no intention of even preparing for a strike.

While the ILWU and PMA “are unlikely to reach a deal before the July 1 expiration of the current agreement,” the statement says, “[n]either party is preparing for a strike or a lockout, contrary to speculation in news reports.”

To keep workers on the job past the July 1 deadline favors only the PMA. The conditions are extraordinarily favorable right now, with a “hot summer” of strikes and other social struggles taking place all over the world. Critically, the shipping and freight industries are increasingly assuming a

central role in the strike movement.

The month of June has already seen port strikes in Germany and Greece, a truckers’ strike in South Korea, which virtually shut down the country’s ports, as well as the first national railway strike in decades in Britain. Meanwhile, a strike vote for railroad workers has been called in the US. Conversely, to keep dockworkers on the job would also hurt the position of workers in related industries such as trucking, the railroads and warehouses.

Comments in the business press indicate that the PMA is pushing for major concessions from workers on the issue of automation, which it wants to use to render some of the highest-paid jobs redundant. The *Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this month that automation “is shaping up to be a key flashpoint in high-stakes contract negotiations.” Jobs slated for automation include some of the most highly coveted and well-paying positions, such as crane operators and truck drivers.

While the ILWU has insisted that they will not accept a contract that leads to further automation without compensation, decades of experience, including contracts in 2008 and 2014 which opened the door for automation, proves that this is not the case. Already, two of the 13 container terminals at the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports are automated, with plans for two more in progress.

The employers are also apparently demanding longer working hours. In an interview with *Transport Topics* published the day before the ILWU-PMA statement was made public, Harbor Trucking Association President Matt Schrap lent his support to a so-called “double flex” proposal. While current shifts on the West Coast ports are normally 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. and 3 a.m. to 8 a.m. after the new “hoot” shift was implemented last year following discussions between the ILWU and Biden administration, the new “double flex” option would allow terminal operators to begin scheduling dockers at 6 a.m.

“It’s on the table to start earlier,” Schrap told *Transport Topics*, adding that it was “hard to believe that a major marine

terminal that handles 40% of the nation's cargo opens at 8 a.m. Those are banker's hours; 7 a.m. is better, and 6 a.m. is probably the best we can get at this time and it's a step in the right direction."

The joint PMA-ILWU statement was released only a few days after a visit to the Port of Los Angeles by President Biden on June 10, where he gave a warmongering speech blaming inflation on Russia and foreign competition in the shipping industry. No doubt the joint statement was worked out in close consultation with the White House.

Numerous officials and policy experts have called on Biden to prepare for open state repression, such as invoking the Taft-Hartley Act to issue an injunction against a strike as previous administrations have done. No doubt, the Biden administration is holding such measures in reserve; it had briefly considered sending the National Guard to the docks in Los Angeles and Long Beach to work through a massive shipping backlog.

However, Biden's preferred strategy is to suppress and prevent a struggle by dockworkers through the corporatist collaboration of the union with the port operators and the government. Indeed, he does not have to bother issuing an injunction if the ILWU is determined to prevent a strike and force through a sellout contract.

The Biden administration has made careful preparations for the dock contract over the course of the past year, and is in daily discussion with both the union and the PMA, according to Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka. "[A]s we have seen from the very beginning," Seroka told industry publication *Logistics Management*, "the Biden-Harris administration, the Cabinet, and senior policy makers have made a strong effort to develop relationships and stay available to both sides as we move through this important negotiation period."

This process can only lead to massive concessions. The playbook was already established earlier this year in the refineries, when the United Steelworkers blocked a strike by US oil workers and pushed through a contract that was worked out in close collaboration with the Biden Administration. USW President Tom Conway even bragged that the deal was was "non-inflationary"—ie, it contained cuts to real wages.

No doubt the ILWU would defend its position by claiming that workers cannot strike because it would contribute to inflation and worsening supply shortages. But in reality these issues themselves are the product of policies, including deliberately allowing COVID to spread rather than carrying out needed public health measures and the outbreak of war against Russia, directed to the benefit of the corporate elite, which can only be opposed by mobilizing the working class against it.

The ruling class does not share the unions' touching concern for the supposed "greater good," but has taken advantage of shortages to engage in price gouging and drive profits up to record levels. Indeed, in spite of the ongoing supply chain

issues, the *Los Angeles Times* reported earlier this month that profits among companies represented by the PMA exceeded \$150 billion last year alone.

Moreover, in spite of the joint communique declaring their mutual desire to avoid stoppages, there is no reason to believe that the PMA would not lock workers out at the first opportunity if they felt it suited their purposes.

While it is in regular communication with the White House, the ILWU is maintaining radio silence with rank-and-file dockworkers. But a recent local contract gives workers some idea of what to expect from the union in spite of this silence. While the contract covers only 15 cement mixers in Portland, the ILWU gloated over it in the May 2022 issue of its newspaper *The Dispatcher*, indicating that the union saw it as a model deal. In fact, the contract is a miserable sellout, containing 15 percent wage increases over 3 years, far below the rate of inflation. The ILWU also negotiated an insulting one-time \$250 "COVID dedication" bonus.

With less than a week until the contract expires, now is the time for dockworkers to organize to fight to establish rank-and-file control. Dockworkers should form a rank-and-file committee to challenge and mobilize opposition to the corporatist policies of the ILWU and to campaign for support from workers in other industries.

A particular appeal must be made to unite all workers, union and nonunion, at the ports, including the thousands of casuals which form a super-exploited layer of the workforce, independently of the ILWU.

One of the first demands that must be raised is for a strike vote. Dockworkers must not accept being forced to labor indefinitely without a contract.

There is no question that any strike or slowdown on the West Coast ports by dockworkers, especially in conjunction with their German brothers and sisters, would have an immense galvanizing impact on workers both throughout the US and internationally. Like the 1934 dockworkers strike which led a general strike in San Francisco, a strike today by West Coast dockworkers would encourage other sections of workers, such as long-haul truck drivers and warehouse workers, who face similar threats to their lives and livelihoods.



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