

West Coast dockworkers: Demand an immediate vote for strike action!

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The contract for 22,000 West Coast dockworkers expires midnight Friday. Workers are fighting against demands by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) for major concessions on working hours and automation, but in spite of this, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has ruled out strike action and made clear it intends to keep workers on the job indefinitely, even without a contract.

ILWU officials have subjected the rank and file to a near-total radio silence, but union officials are in daily discussions behind closed doors with both the Biden administration and the PMA. Two weeks ago, the union and the PMA issued a joint statement meant to reassure corporate interests that while they “are unlikely to reach a deal before the July 1 expiration of the current agreement ... [n]either party is preparing for a strike or a lockout, contrary to speculation in news reports.”

Why has the ILWU ruled out a strike? This only strengthens the hands of the port bosses and weakens workers.

The PMA is determined to eliminate the highest-paid positions through automation, and increase the length of the working day through a “double flex” shift. There are even proposals to begin operating the ports 24/7 on a permanent basis, which ILWU officials indicated in a video interview they were open to.

The PMA’s demands are so provocative that the ILWU was compelled to suspend talks for 10 days earlier this year. But far from mobilizing the power of dockworkers to break the intransigence of the corporations, the ILWU is ready to let talks continue not only through July, but well into the fall. Why should the position of the PMA be any different then, especially if the ILWU continues to neuter dockworkers?

Keeping workers on the job not only makes a mockery of the principle of “no contract, no work,” it amounts to an effective banning of a strike action. In following this

disastrous course, the ILWU is taking its marching orders directly from the Biden administration, which declared that work stoppages “would not be tolerated this year,” and is in daily discussions with both the union and the PMA.

Dockworkers cannot accept this. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges dockworkers to demand the immediate holding of a strike vote and hard deadline of one week for the PMA to give workers a contract that meets their demands. If the PMA does not provide one, an all-out strike must be called at all 29 port facilities on the West Coast. At the same time, the \$120 million in ILWU assets must be released to pay strike benefits so the full income of striking workers can be replaced. This will demonstrate to PMA that workers mean business.

Such a fight will require the unleashing of the power of rank-and-file workers. This means developing workplace committees, democratically controlled by the ranks, to formulate key demands, mobilize workers to prevent strikebreaking, and reach out to far broader sections of the working class to organize mass demonstrations and prepare joint strike action.

These demands should include:

- Full Cost of Living (COLA) increases, plus a 15 percent annual raise to protect workers against surging inflation and begin to make up for years of stagnant wages;
- No job losses to automation, no extension to the working day. If port operators want to increase capacity, they must do it by raising wages to attract new workers;
- An end to the fratricidal division of workers against each other by seniority and job status. Casual workers, who make up half the workforce but are not even union members, must be brought up to full-time status, with full benefits and contractual rights, and;
- Workers control over safety and working conditions, including protections against COVID, to prevent tragedies

such as the deaths of Edgar Ruiz and Chulaih Ang at the Port of LA this January.

To leave the fate of workers, as the ILWU does, in the hands of the White House and the Democrats is to guarantee that workers will be forced to make massive concessions. This was proven earlier in the year when Biden personally intervened in national oil refinery talks, working with the United Steelworkers to block a strike and force through a contract, which contained a 2.5 percent wage first-year raise.

Biden and the ruling class, through its mouthpieces in the corporate press, claim that dockworkers have no right to strike because it would worsen the country's social and economic crisis. This was the argument made by a federal judge this year when he issued an injunction against a railroad strike at BNSF. This paved the way for the Warren Buffett-owned railroad to impose a brutal attendance policy, which has driven thousands of higher-paid workers out of their jobs.

The same people making these claims are the ones responsible for the chaos in the first place—not just in supply chains, but in the airlines, health care, education and every other area of public life. The cause of the crisis is the decision by Trump and then Biden to prioritize profits over human life by allowing COVID to spread uncontrolled rather than using public health measures to eliminate it. This criminal policy led to one million deaths in the US and 20 million worldwide, the debilitation of millions more with Long COVID, and devastating economic and social turmoil around the world.

Inflation has been greatly worsened by the US-sponsored proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which oil companies have seized upon as an occasion to rake in record profits. Now Biden and the Federal Reserve are threatening to drive the economy into a recession and use the prospect of mass unemployment to beat back the demands of workers for wage increases that keep up with surging inflation. When they speak of the health of “the economy,” they do not mean the economic well-being of the population. They mean the rate of profit big business extracts *at the expense of* the working class.

What it really boils down to is this: Who will pay for the crisis? The corporations and the political establishment want to force the cost onto workers. But workers want human need to come first, and to end the profit-driven policies which have caused the crisis. The only way to bring about this second outcome is to wage a struggle.

West Coast dockworkers waged their most powerful strike in history in 1934, in the depths of the Great

Depression. This was part of a wave of militant and victorious strikes which led to substantial social gains for workers everywhere. They were won not through appeals to the government, but through appeals for unity from the working class. On the docks, the decisive battle came when workers in San Francisco launched a general strike in July which forced the employers to back down.

For all of his talk about being “worker friendly,” Biden is holding in reserve more direct means of repression, including explicit injunctions of the type which previous administrations used against the dockworkers in 1948, 1971 and 2002. Last fall, Biden considered deploying the National Guard to the docks to deal with clogged supply chains, before the ILWU spared him the embarrassment by agreeing to work 24/7.

Dockworkers face powerful adversaries, but they have more powerful allies: the international working class. The better organized and resolute workers are, the more successful the strike will be.

A strike at the docks would have a galvanizing effect on workers everywhere, who are in the midst of a global “hot summer” of strikes and protests, in which major strikes by dockworkers in Germany and other countries and related industries are playing a central role.

This requires first of all that workers wrest control of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy through the formation of a rank-and-file committee. Such a committee, in contrast to the radio silence from the ILWU, which is also instructing workers not to speak to the press, would provide a space for democratic discussion about what workers' demands are.

The *World Socialist Web Site* proposes that a Dockworkers Rank-and-File Committee demand the convocation of an immediate strike vote and the setting of a strike deadline, no later than July 11. At the same time, the wall of silence surrounding the talks with management and Biden officials must be halted. All talks should be livestreamed and made publicly available to workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist workers any way it can. For more information about how to form a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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