

Frustration builds among West Coast dockworkers as ILWU keeps them on the job past contract expiration

Tom Hall
1 July 2022

Work at the docks? Fill out the form at the end to let us know what you think about the contract expiration, what your working conditions are like and what workers should be fighting for. We'll protect your anonymity.

The contract for 22,000 West Coast dockworkers expires at midnight Friday evening without a new deal. The lack of a deal by the time of expiration is widely expected. Statements by both the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association, the group representing port employers, indicated that it was their intention to continue talks past the deadline.

The ILWU is keeping workers on the job without a new contract indefinitely. There has been complete radio silence from the union on the progress and character of the talks, and even on when a contract could be expected.

Meanwhile, both parties have been meeting on virtually a daily basis with the Biden administration, which declared to one industry outlet that work stoppages “would not be tolerated this year.” The ruling class knows that a strike on the West Coast docks would not only have an immediate impact; it would also have a galvanizing effect on workers across the US and around the world.

One of the few official statements from the union came in the form of a joint statement with the PMA, in which it pledged that it had no intention of preparing for a strike. This statement and the decision to keep workers on the job, in violation of the principle of “no contract, no work,” have produced considerable anger and frustration among dockworkers.

“I would prefer to strike even against the union’s advice than let shippers get away with their lies and automation demands,” one southern California worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Earlier this week, the WSWS issued a statement urging dockworkers to demand the ILWU call an immediate strike authorization vote and set a strike deadline of July 11 for the PMA to give a contract that meets all of their demands. To fight for this, the WSWS called for the formation of a Dockworkers Rank-and-File Committee to end the secrecy surrounding contract talks, establish rank-and-file control and appeal for support from dockworkers and other workers around the US and the world.

In a statement earlier this week, Labor Secretary Marty Walsh declared that all was well with the discussions behind closed doors. Both sides “continually tell me that we’re in a good place. It’s moving forward,” Walsh said. “There’s been no issues that I’m aware of that have come up that have made either side concerned.”

In fact, press reports indicate that the PMA is demanding sweeping

concessions, particularly in automating some of the highest-paid jobs and lengthening the working day. If, under these conditions, the talks are “moving forward with no issues,” this can only mean that the ILWU bureaucracy is conspiring with the port operators and the Biden administration to enforce a major sellout on the workers.

Indeed, the ILWU released a study this week recommending that the state of California issue a tax levy on automated port facilities in Los Angeles and Long Beach, “with revenues directed to communities that suffer economic harm from the loss of dockworker jobs,” the *Journal of Commerce* reports. In other words, the ILWU is seeking to set the political conditions for it to accept job losses due to automation, rather than mobilizing workers against job cuts.

The ILWU already functions as a cheap labor contractor for the PMA through its role in providing a continual supply of tens of thousands of casual workers. This exploited layer are little more than day laborers with no benefits. They are not even union members. The ILWU, however, strings along casual workers with false promises that they can be hired in as full timers within two to five years. “Thanks to the ILWU, we actually increased our dockworker workforce by 16 percent last year” to help work through backlogs, Dann Wan, executive director of the Port of Oakland, told CNBC.

“The cost of living is tearing us apart”

One casual worker in Southern California told the WSWS: “Work has been very sporadic. It has been super-slow this week. I haven’t been able to go out even once. This makes this job basically just a little extra money at best. The ILWU has created this myth that working as casuals will lead you to a good job, so a lot of us do leave our jobs to pursue what is portrayed as a good longshore job. But the reality is that we end up working as casuals for many years, making very little money, and without any benefits. I know it’s the union that contributed to creating the tier system. It’s very unjust. We have no protection whatsoever as casuals.

“I have another job or else I would not be making a living as a dockworker alone. The thing is that I am second generation longshoreman, and what I make is nothing compared to my family members. They had it way better decades ago. Today, the cost of living is tearing us apart. Workers at McDonald’s do better than us. They even have some benefits, insurance, retirement. We have none

of this.

“Concretely, if we had more hours assigned to us, say four to five full days a week, it would still be very low, somewhere around \$900 a week. Here in Los Angeles, that is nothing. Then we would need at least 4,000 hours to go through the stages: ID, B-man, A-man. After all is said and done, you are looking at 12 to 15 years of casual labor before you really can have a serious job. And then automation threatens that as well. According to my calculations, I would need 14 years of this to see benefits.

“Down at the hall we go in at 6:30 a.m and in the afternoon around 4 p.m., you can catch so many of us waiting to even get a job and only a few are available. If you come down, you will see with your own eyes, and you can talk to any of us. They will tell you the same story.

“Regarding the new contract, we are being kept totally in the dark. I have a lot of family on the docks and no one is talking about it. I’d say that at least 90 percent of us don’t have a clue, all we know that bringing automation and not giving us jobs is killing us.”

Anxiety within ruling circles over dockworkers struggle

Behind the anodyne and reassuring official statements, there is deep anxiety within the corporate elite that the PMA and ILWU may not be able to keep rank-and-file anger under control. The *New York Times* published an article Thursday morning, “As Dockworkers Near Contract’s End, Many Others Have a Stake,” in which it used cherry-picked interviews with a single trucker and businessman to portray a strike as having a “crushing” impact on a population already dealing with rising prices and shortages.

The *Times* also stressed the unprecedented character of the Biden administration’s intervention in the talks, which began months before negotiations even officially began. “Mr. Biden’s early intervention could help stave off severe backlogs,” the *Times* said. Geraldine Knatz, former executive director for the Port of Los Angeles, told the paper, “In the past, the federal government would swoop in at the end when negotiations were at a stalemate. The relationship that developed between the ports and the Biden administration as a result of the supply chain crisis is something that did not exist before.”

While the *Times* sheds crocodile tears for the supposed economic harm done by a strike, the same media mouthpiece of corporate America argues that it may be necessary to trigger a recession in order to rein in “inflation,” by which it means any push for higher wages by workers. It also coined the phrase “the cure can’t be worse than the disease” in early 2020 when prominent *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argued against lockdowns and other measures needed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic as too costly to the “economy.”

The rejection of such measures has led to 1 million deaths in the US, including at least 70 dockworkers. Allowing the virus to spread unhindered is the main cause of the supply chain crisis itself, in addition to the US-provoked war against Russia in Ukraine. The corporate oligarchy for whom the *Times* speaks, however, is raking in more profits than ever before. This is the only standard by which they measure the health of the “economy.”

“These are our lives. We are not going to give that up.”

A full-time Oakland dockworker said, “To ship one container before the pandemic in 2019 cost \$1,200. As of today, one container costs \$15,000. They are making 15 times as much as what they were making before. Our health care is free, so we’re going in with that as non-negotiable. We’re asking for cleaner equipment, better equipment that we work on and cleaner, better, safer working conditions. That’s what’s on the table.

“They are gonna say we got great wages, we make \$150,000 a year, blah blah blah. But nothing compares to them going from billions to trillions a year. The companies are gonna make it look like we are greedy, but with today’s prices, our salary is just breaking even or check to check.”

“We want the support of the working class,” he concluded. “Every time there’s a fight, we are there for everyone. We just want to be treated like we treat people.”

Enormous support exists in the working class for the dockworkers, including among dockworkers on the East Coast, who are in a separate union, the International Longshoremen’s Association. “What are they saying? Are they going to strike? We would support them,” one Hampton Roads dockworker said.

“Why haven’t they called a strike vote yet? They want to cut us out, but if all of us can pull together, we can win,” she continued. “They want to pay us minimum wages. I checked on the companies, they spent 3 percent on labor last year! Three percent! And they say we are making too much. That is bulls***.”

After reviewing the exorbitant six-figure salaries of top ILA officials, she called them “outrageous, ridiculous,” adding, “This is knowledge that needs to be known about. We all need this information.”

The Hampton Roads dockworker said that she and others won’t stand for the concessions that are coming down the line, especially automation without compensation. “No, this is our job. These are our lives. We are not going to give that up.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact