

As ILWU keeps workers on the job past contract expiration

“We sleep in our cars trying to get work”: Casual worker at San Diego docks speaks out on working conditions

Our reporter

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The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) is keeping 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job after their contract expired July 1, while it continues closed-door talks with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the Biden administration.

The PMA is demanding major concessions on automation and the lengthening of working hours. In spite of this, the ILWU issued a joint statement with the PMA last month declaring that it has no intention of even preparing for a strike. Under these circumstances, the only possible outcome of the talks is a sellout. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* issued a statement calling for the immediate convocation of a strike vote and the setting of a strike deadline.

The ILWU bureaucracy functions as little more than a labor contractor for the port operators. One of the most egregious examples of this is in the conditions of casual workers, who make up roughly half the total workforce. This lowest tier effectively live and work as day laborers, with no contractual rights, no benefits and far less than 40-hour workweeks. Even though their working conditions are set by the contract, they are not union members and do not even have the right to vote on the contract.

The ILWU helps to string these workers along under the claim that casual work is a form of “apprenticeship,” and that they can be hired in at full time after a certain period. But officially this period can last up to five years, and in reality lasts far beyond that.

The WSWs recently spoke to a casual worker from San Diego. His name has been changed to protect his identity.

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WSWS: How long have you been a casual?

Carver: I started in the spring of 2019.

WSWS: What did you think of our call for a strike vote ?

Carver: I heard you guys were out there at the dispatch,

and one of my coworkers called me and told me a young lady spoke to him about it. We 100 percent agree, that is the whole point.

WSWS: What’s your experience as a casual?

Carver: To get the [full-time] job, we have to work hours. Eventually you become an ID and then an “A” man. They inform us that much at the start, but it’s not right.

WSWS: We were speaking to several other casuals and they told us that it takes many years to get to that point.

Carver: Yeah, that’s correct.

WSWS: One dockworker told me she plugs in [applies to work] every day, twice a day at the hall for seven days a week. From the beginning of this year, she made \$9,000. She was telling me she can’t even get a second job because then you lose the opportunity to plug.

Carver: It’s hard to maintain a regular job and still cover your number. We’re covered by a number we get issued. Every time you ever come around, the objective is to be there to cover that number and work towards your number. You’re getting your hours up at the same time, that’s your paycheck. That’s your only income.

Some of us sleep in our cars for many days, wait just for that day to get out.

WSWS: Why do workers have to sacrifice so much before they actually get a semi-decent job? Why do you have to give 10 years of your working life to PMA before you even see a decent paycheck? And why is the ILWU not protecting you?

Carver: All of us are led to believe it’s PMA, but I believe it’s the union more so than PMA. I like to believe the union has my best interests at heart, but once money gets involved, we become political pawns.

I only have a high school education, but I understand how unions work. I know once that money gets involved via the union dues; there’s a whole lot of corruption stems from it. I

believe it all stems around money at the end of the day, be it the corrupt corporations or the entity of the ILWU, and we are pawns.

WSWS: We would agree with that.

Carver: It's not fair they got us chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I quit two jobs to give my all to this. This is the highest wage I have ever earned in my life, with minimal education. So, yeah. So you quit your previous jobs to just do this in the hope that you're going to stick around long enough to become a B man or an A man, eventually.

WSWS: How long do you think it is? How many years? Before you can?

Carver: I can't actually say. They give us an estimate of five years. However, it's all determined by the amount of work that comes into any particular port. They want us to reach 4000 hours. And then, once you reach 4000 hours, then you can be elevated. It's a matter of when they choose to do the elevation because people can be sitting there with four or five thousand hours in the union, whoever they haven't decided to elevate. So their whole point of getting to 4000 hours and then you elevate, that's not true. They all have the matter as a means to elevate when they want, but they try to tell us it's based on the amount of work. If the port doesn't have enough work, we can travel to other ports.

WSWS: How was work been for you? How many days were at how many hours a week?

Carver: As of the last 60 days, it's been between eight to 16 hours a week. I was supposed to be here today, but I didn't think I would be able to make it out here. I came home and missed this morning. I worked yesterday from eight to 4:30pm shift. That would have been all my work this whole week.

Having that job as a casual when trying to to buy a home, it's a huge problem. You're not getting 40 hours a week. They need to see your check stubs, and then your credit.

WSWS: How are casuals supposed to survive with just that little?

Carver: We sleep in our cars when we go down, those of us that don't live near the San Diego port I worked at. At San Diego, it was a lot of us that couldn't get on at the LA Port, individuals that live in Los Angeles, that drive down to San Diego, and have to try to cover their number because they're casual. They sleep in a car. They come from all over, chasing that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I mean, I was told they got new casuals coming from Hawaii. These are the things we have to go through.

I've slept in my car two, three, four days, a whole week. Sometimes because the work is good, because we're working constantly, sometimes because we're just waiting, because my number is just right there, and I'm waiting. I've got to be there to cover my number. But some of them have

other jobs, those that live in San Diego, that are local. Some of them live on unemployment. Some have spouses that support. It's a variety of means, and Lord knows what else people try to stay afloat, just to make it and get in.

WSWS: What do you think about these conditions given 8.6 percent inflation? How are you going to be compensated?

Carver: Here's the thing. I pay attention. I'm very much aware of the power that all workers have throughout the world, the United States. The point is trying to get the collective to understand how much weight and how much power they have, aside from worrying about having to feed their children, having to keep a roof over their head.

They [the ILWU] have basically given away all the leverage we have. I didn't know that until I read the literature. Striking is the greatest leverage of all. If you've given that away, you're basically saying, "Do what you will with me." As a casual, we can't even really strike. They want this to be taboo.

WSWS: COVID is still here, it's not going away. Look at the way they've handled it. At least 70 workers in LA and Long Beach died from COVID.

Carver: I heard it was quite a few, quite a few. Not that many died at San Diego. It's a small port, but I know some that it's affected. We worked through COVID.

WSWS: We think workers need to understand that their enemy isn't just an individual employer but an entire system that's based on the division of classes, the rich and the rest of us.

Carver: We need to start talking in terms that are objectively true. The power of workers is objectively true. It's just that workers need to be reminded that the system has been designed for us to think that we need them more than they need us because we need dollar bills. They need us more than we need them, because they don't get their riches if not for the workers.



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