“Striking is the only option, it seems like”: LA casual dockworkers call for united struggle with full-time workers

Marc Wells
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Work at the docks? Fill out the form at the end of this article 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.

For the past ten days, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has kept 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast on the job without a contract after their previous deal expired July 1. Meanwhile, the ILWU is carrying out secret talks with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), in which the Biden administration is heavily involved.

Behind this silence, the ILWU is working assiduously with the port operators to ram through a sellout contract. A joint statement by the ILWU and the PMA was released in mid-June declaring that they “are unlikely to reach a deal before the July 1 expiration of the current agreement” and that “[n]either party is preparing for a strike or a lockout, contrary to speculation in news reports.” But news reports have made clear that the PMA is demanding major concessions on automation and the length of the working day. For decades, the ILWU has made one concession after another on automation, beginning in earnest in 1960 through the Mechanization and Modernization agreement and continued in recent years in 2002, 2008 and 2014-15.

On July 1, the date of the contract expiration, another joint statement confirmed: “While there will be no contract extension, cargo will keep moving, and normal operations will continue at the ports until an agreement can be reached between the Pacific Maritime Association and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.” In other words, the ILWU is keeping workers on the job without even a formal contract extension, meaning that from a legal standpoint dockworkers are no longer bound by a no-strike clause in the previous contract.

In addition to the 22,000 ILWU members who are divided into A and B classifications based on seniority, a similar number of low-paid casual workers make up the bottom third tier of the workforce on the docks. Each day, thousands of casuals line up at hiring halls across the West Coast for an outside chance of working for that day. The average casual, however, ends up working far less than full time, and because of the uncertain nature of their employment on the docks, they cannot easily pick up second jobs. They have no benefits and are not even union members, meaning they have no contractual rights, including the right to vote on the contract which determines their wages and working conditions.

Jamie was a union member all her life, until now, since a casual cannot be an ILWU member. “Whatever they
decide does affect us and why not make us part of it? I don’t know where that comes from. In my previous job even as a per diem worker we would still have a voting voice and I don’t understand why they don’t do it here; they would have the voice of more workers to pass decisions.”

She described a typical day at the hall. “I got here at 6 a.m., we stayed here the entire day, didn’t get a job and now [4:30 p.m.] we’re back, trying to wait for another job. When I started here, I was still working my previous job at first, then was doing so many hours here that I left the other job. Then it slowed down; we’re waiting for the new contract, see if they hire more people. Since I started a few years ago, just 1,800 casuals made it to ID status.”

Asked whether workers have the right to strike despite the union seeking to avert one, Jamie said: “If it’s necessary, I think it should be done. I marched with my dad, have marched as a worker. If they [ILWU] tell me I can’t because I can be punished for it, I have to honor what they agree upon, but personally I find it a weakness. We’re like DWP [The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power]: if those workers stop working, who’s going to turn the power on? That’s their leverage.”

In case of a strike, she said, “We’re not obligated to strike since we’re not union, but I would not cross the picket line.” Another worker interjected, “I’m down, totally down. Unions are in bed with the politicians and the corporations. It’s a rigged system. We take the slack that other [A and B Class] workers don’t want. And no benefits at all? Even some crappy insurance would be okay.”

On safety, he expressed concerns about some of the jobs. “When a lash job [strapping container to a ship] comes, the good ones know, they have experience. But casuals? We don’t do it every day. You go up there, it’s a rusty old beat-up ship, it’s really a tough job and it makes it hard because the other guys don’t want it. You don’t have to take it, but a lot of us do because we’ve been waiting three days for a job.”

On training he added: “They talk a lot about training, but I’m not seeing any. You get it on the job. I took the online safety training thing. Down here it’s the real world, the blood is real. Training should be done on the dock, not online. We take care of each other when we see new people come in, we watch out for them; when we get to the dock we get on the same crane as them to help them out, give them a heads up on the radio if they’re doing something they shouldn’t. I don’t want to see anything happen to anybody.”

Before this incident took place, Mike told the WSWS, “They [the union] have become weaker. Anything that has money has a problem. It used to be that a dockworker would be the union president. Now they hire a guy.”

Speaking of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten making $540,000 a year, he commented, “And the teachers aren’t making anything! The shortage of teachers is because they don’t pay! They’d have plenty if they paid enough!”

Discarding the tier system, he said abolishing the casual system and guaranteeing rights and benefits for all “would seem like a fair way to do it. When you first start out maybe a little less money, but with benefits, then as you get more experience you improve. But don’t start me out as a day laborer, that seems extreme. We take the slack that other [A and B Class] workers don’t want. And no benefits at all? Even some crappy insurance would be okay.”

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