

“The ILWU started out democratic, but it’s not that way anymore”

Port of Tacoma dockworker speaks out about working conditions, inequality and union corruption

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We encourage all West Coast dockworkers to contact us to share your stories, speak on the current contract negotiations and learn more about forming independent rank-and-file committees.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a Port of Tacoma dockworker, who will be referred to as Bill to protect his identity. Bill spoke about his working and living conditions, the tier system and the role of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in blocking a strike. The ILWU has kept workers on the job without even a formal contract extension after their contract expired on July 1.

Bill started as a casual dockworker or C Tier in 2005 which he continued until 2015, when he finally was approved to join the B Tier. He is currently an A Tier worker. Casual workers are paid significantly lower wages, are not guaranteed hours, and do not get any benefits or rights from the union, including the right to vote on the contract.

“While I was a casual, I worked anywhere from 60 hours a week to none. I mean, during 2008-09, it was like maybe once a month, if you were lucky.” He continued, “We had to stand outside of the hall. We weren’t allowed in the hall except for dispatch, so we waited on the sidewalk.

“We aren’t compensated for pick [waiting for work assignments]. I get picked at 4:00. I don’t start until 6:00. So I’m pretty much stuck for two hours with nothing to do, and I’m not getting paid. I can’t go anywhere because it’s a traffic island. ... And we don’t get paid for transit time and costs. I know people that live out 45 or 50 minutes away, and especially when I was a casual, I mean, you could drive in twice a day and not get work. So you wasted all that gas. You wasted all that time. And that’s nothing compared to my uncles and dad. They literally peed where they had to stand all morning waiting for a job.”

3-tier system since 1960 drove down wages and conditions

In the Los Angeles-Long Beach port system, nearly 50 percent

of the labor pool is casualized. The three-tier system was established in 1960 with the Mechanization & Modernization (M&M) Agreement passed by the ILWU, facilitating a decades-long campaign to drive down the wages, conditions and job security of dockworkers. While the working class has paid the price for these defeats, the port and logistics corporations have made trillions.

“[As a casual] you don’t get support at all. You’re pretty much told, ‘This is a great opportunity and suck it up. McDonald’s is always hiring.’ And when I was the casual, the union guys were super mean to you and people in general. They just wanted to keep it to themselves.

“If we said anything, they [the union reps and managers] would threaten us, saying they’ll just hire more casuals. We were told, basically, ‘We don’t need you. You need to learn the job and the operation.’ When the recession happened, they made us work so many hours before getting to B status. I had 11,000 hours as a casual, but now they take people in with like 1,000. Since I became B in 2015, I think they’ve taken over 500 B men, where the prior 10 years they took 108. I don’t mind that at all, but like these people don’t know their jobs, and it’s dangerous. They need proper training.”

Casual workers also do not receive any health care or pension benefits, adding to the economic hardships of precarious work. “We didn’t get Obamacare, and we didn’t get union benefits,” Bill explained, “even though we were working just as much as the A and B guys, if not more. ... So my friends and I were paying like five grand in fees because we couldn’t get health care. And we didn’t qualify for any of the lower cost ones because we had employment.

“The union makes it so hard to advance to A. They go out of their way to make rules, to make it hard for you to advance. You have to be B for five years. Then they constantly change the rules. Sometimes the contract with PMA says you need to have 70 percent of the average hours as a B personnel, but then randomly the locals make backdoor deals with the PMA that say B men need 20 shifts a month now.

“Then they have this archaic doctor’s note that you have to fill

out. If it's not filled out the exact way they want, they'll kick you out, or they'll give you six months back. That means they extend the period of time that you have to be working as a B. And you only get one chance for six months back. The second time, you're de-registered, and you can get back on a last chance program where you gotta go to treatment, you gotta jump through all their hoops, and you restart your B career. They just put the rules under glass. If you don't read it and don't keep up on it, you could be penalized for it. Even though there was no mail or direct communication with you, especially the casuals. There's no backing as far as the people, like the actual officers."

After 17 years working at the docks, Bill has lost all confidence in the ILWU to defend workers and carry out a struggle. He said that workers have not received any serious information about the status of negotiations between the ILWU and PMA, even when he has asked about what is going on.

"The union totally leaves us in the dark. It's a 'good old boy' club. I don't go to meetings; I can't deal with the bureaucracy and all the upper people in the union. They tell you to 'sit down and shut up. We know everything, you know nothing, so just do what you're told, and we'll keep doing a good job.'

"For instance, I went to a meeting about the contract. They talked about the crane drivers for two hours, which affects 2 percent of the workers. Then when they wanted to talk about the contract, they pretty much said, 'We got it covered. Don't ask questions, just keep doing what you're doing. This is a militant union, you just need to listen to us, keep your head down and your mouth shut.' That's the gist of it. And that's just pretty much how it's been run for a long time, and it's not right, because that's not the way it's supposed to be. I know it started out very democratic, but it's not that way any more.

"Since the walkout in 2002, the workers themselves have been just a political ploy. Because of getting locked out for 10 days, everything changed then. Like we just don't have a strike option. It's so politicized now. [The media] paints us as these well-paid horrible people that hold the economy in lock. They blame all the supply-chain issues on us. Our job is very hard. It's very difficult. It's very time consuming. I have skills that no one else in the world has. People will say if we don't do our jobs, mom and pop in Minnesota have to shut down. But it's like, they should support us!

"I have a family. ... I can't do 10-hour shifts"

"That's really frustrating to me because I feel like our contract has been so politicized over the last 20 or so years. In 2014, we worked with an extended contract for almost two years, and then Obama finally stepped in and the union lost all the footwork because the negotiators normally side with the PMA and say we just need to get cargo moving. So I'm worried this year, especially about the proposal for 10-hour shifts. I base my whole life off working eight-hour shifts. I have a family. I watch my kids during the day. I can't do 10-hour shifts so that they want the gates open

earlier.

"We already do night gates. But the truckers don't come because the truckers' employers are too cheap to pay them night wages. So they stand by all night. It doesn't make any sense. A trucker could get from Tacoma to Olympia seven times a night compared to maybe two during the day. Then the railroads have just as much to do with all the supply chain issues. After the pandemic, all the trains got stuck in the Midwest, and we couldn't get them back to the West Coast. Then there's only so many cars that can fit on a train. Because of profits the railroad barons prioritize oil shipments over containers. Then that just creates more backlog."

Bill agreed with the WSWs reporter that truckers and rail workers are powerful allies of dockworkers, but added that "We have been taught they are the enemy. The first chance they get the media puts some trucker on there saying how the rich elitist longshoremen are hurting his family. But we have common issues.

"This once-in-a-generation financial crisis has happened to my generation, to millennials in general. Ninety percent of my generation can't buy a house because the prices went from less than \$100,000 to over five or six in 20 years. Our wages didn't go up. There's no transfer of wealth through the generations anymore. People with two good jobs can't buy a house. A teacher and a firefighter can't buy a house. And it's because of the predatory banks and the corporations.

"If the economy crashes, it's not gonna affect the Chase family or the Morgan family. They don't care. All they want is cheap labor and to keep us in enough debt to keep us working but never get to a middle class level. I've read a lot of articles about how, like the capitalist system is way more oppressive than the old caste system of India and Europe and stuff.

"It's just this constant lie of the American Dream. I don't care if you're a grocery checker or a car washer, you should be able to afford at least an apartment for yourself and food and gas and insurance, and not have to rely on food assistance. That's another way they keep workers in poverty, the welfare state. There's no step system. If you get a job and you make more than \$1,000 a month, you lose all benefits.

"It's constant corporate greed. And there's no stop. It's frustrating because the billionaires will never have to worry about anything. Elon Musk is never gonna be worried about climate change, because if worse comes to worse, he's going to put a bubble over his head, then it's not gonna affect him. You have a billion dollars to spare. You could feed the entire world if you want, but you choose not to. Elon Musk could invest in his own company and get our grid off fossil fuels in five years, but it's not profitable to do that, so he doesn't.

"I'm definitely a democratic socialist. I don't like this system. It's the elite that own the railroads and everything else. It has nothing to do with helping people and working class families. It's the elite and what they want."



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