

The way forward for port truckers is unity with the dockworkers!

David Brown, Tom Hall
24 July 2022

On Monday truck drivers at the Port of Oakland in Northern California enter into their second week of protests against Assembly Bill 5 (AB5). For a full week, truck drivers have shut down the eighth largest port in the country to maintain their status as independent contractors, demonstrating their immense social power.

While the ostensible purpose of AB5 is to protect workers “misclassified” as independent contractors, such as Uber drivers, it also threatens the livelihoods of 70,000 trucking owner-operators who haul the vast majority of freight from the state’s ports. They would either have to form their own companies at immense personal expense or become employees of a trucking company. Truckers are demanding they be exempted from the law.

Despite the combined efforts of the port, the state and the unions, truckers have not backed down. “We have to go all the way with this,” said one driver. “If we go back to work, then this week will be for nothing.”

There is no shortage of courage and determination among port truckers, but the burning question they face is how to push their fight forward. Truckers must appeal to other sections of the working class—above all, to the dockworkers in Oakland and other West Coast ports—for a united struggle and make their fight the tip of the spear against corporate attacks on workers’ living standards and working conditions.

The entire corporate and political establishment has lined up against the truckers. The administration of multi-millionaire Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom declared “it’s time to move forward” and “comply with the law.” Some of his right-wing Republican opponents, such as Brian Dahle, have feigned support only to use the protests to press for regulatory exemptions for tech giants like Uber and Lyft. The Port of Oakland has responded to the truckers strike by creating “Free Speech Zones” and directing law enforcement against those who step outside their boundaries.

Trade union officials, including International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10 President Farless Dailey III, have come out against the truckers. “We are in favor of AB5, not against it,” Dailey said and denounced the truckers for “creating conditions which make it unsafe for workers to pass through the gates and do our jobs.” Appeals to the courts have likewise fallen on deaf ears.

But one would be profoundly mistaken to draw the conclusion from this that the truckers are powerless. On the contrary, the lineup of forces against them reflects their terror of the truckers’ social power. Without them, nothing moves off the docks, freight trains run empty, warehouses remain unstocked and factories without parts. The entire US supply chain would grind to a halt.

But most of all, they are terrified that the example of the truckers can trigger rank-and-file rebellions by workers all over the country. America is a social powder keg. The same corporate oligarchs accusing truckers of being “selfish” and “entitled” have raked in trillions even as millions of people have died in the pandemic and inflation spirals out of control. Meanwhile, millions of workers have been driven to the brink over the past two years and there is a growing recognition that things have to fundamentally change.

In particular, they are terrified that the truckers will encourage a rebellion on the docks. The same lineup of forces—the Democrats and the government, the port operators, the corrupt, pro-corporate trade union bureaucrats—has been engaged in a major conspiracy to prevent work stoppages by 22,000 West Coast dockworkers and force through a concessions contract.

They have all come together to strangle this critical struggle before it threatens the \$150 billion in profits for the PMA, the union’s corrupt pro-company ties and the Biden administration’s plans for war across Europe and Asia, which requires the continued operation of the docks. The Biden administration’s Port and Supply Chain

Envoy, Gen. Stephen Lyons, has been meeting with the head of the PMA and ILWU for months. Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka praised the ILWU for making its members work extraordinary hours out of contract, saying “credit to the ILWU for coming in early, staying late, working these flex shifts.”

For nearly a month, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union has kept dockworkers on the job without a contract, or even a formal extension of the previous one. Meanwhile, the bureaucrats have been engaged for months in closed-door discussions with the Pacific Maritime Association and the Biden administration. Last month, they issued an incredible joint statement with the PMA saying that they had no intention of calling a strike, even though the PMA is demanding major concessions on automation and working hours.

The ILWU is deliberately attempting to drive a wedge between the dockworkers and the truckers. But the ILWU does not speak for the dockworkers. Hundreds of dockworkers last week refused to cross the truckers’ picket line last week, in a show not only of solidarity with truckers but a deep anger and frustration with the ILWU. “We are working without a contract right now so we support the owner-operators and understand what they are trying to do,” one Oakland dockworker told *Freight Waves*.

The ILWU is little more than a labor contractor. Half of the workforce on the docks are “casual” day laborers whom the union treats with contempt. They have no contractual rights, even the right to vote on the contract which sets their wages and working conditions.

The union bureaucracy supports AB5 in large measure because truckers, as employees, would then be eligible to become dues-paying union members. But the bureaucracy would then impose upon the truckers the same type of corporatist regime which it upholds on the docks themselves and work hand in glove to prevent the types of protests which truckers are organizing now.

The only way forward is through a united struggle of truckers and dockworkers. Truckers must establish lines of communication and issue their own statements appealing to dockworkers to join them in their struggle. There cannot be any doubt this would meet with tremendous enthusiasm. Truckers and dockworkers should form joint rank-and-file action committees all over California and up and down the West Coast, composed of delegations of truckers and rank-and-file dockworkers, excluding ILWU bureaucrats, to prepare for joint action, including work stoppages, pickets and other forms of

protest.

These committees, as they expand, should draw in the support and collaboration of railroaders at Union Pacific, BNSF and others who move freight from the docks further down the supply chains. Railroaders, who have been without a contract for nearly three years, voted by 99.5 percent to strike earlier this month against brutal 24/7 scheduling systems which leave them with no time for their families. They were blocked from striking when Biden appointed a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) to mediate the dispute. For generations, these boards have invariably imposed settlements favorable to management. But for months, the rail unions themselves had openly campaigned for Biden to intervene, effectively demanding the White House legalize a strike by their own members.

Eighty-eight years ago, the 1934 West Coast dock strike electrified workers across the country. It was one of the first major counteroffensives by the American working class against the poverty and misery of the Great Depression. The strike quickly spread to other sections of workers, culminating in the San Francisco general strike of the same year. A struggle on the docks today could have the same impact.

But even more than that, it would encourage workers all over the world, who are also fighting against exploitation and the spiraling cost of living. Earlier this summer, South Korean truckers shut down the docks nationwide for over a week. Nationwide strikes in the railroads and docks are taking place all over Europe. The most important of these international struggles is in Sri Lanka, where a mass uprising has forced the resignation of the president. A movement by American workers, especially one which involves the many immigrants who work in port trucking, would have a powerful impact.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist any way that it can. If you are a trucker or a dockworker, contact us for more information today by filling out the form below:



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact