ILWU announces agreement with West Coast port operators on health care but refuses to release details

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28 July 2022

On Tuesday, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) released a three-paragraph statement announcing "a tentative agreement on terms for health benefits, subject to agreement on the other issues in the negotiations." The ILWU has been keeping more than 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job since their contract expired July 1 without any formal extension. The operators in the Pacific Maritime Association have made an unprecedented $190 billion in profits last year.

No details have been released, under the guise of an accord with the PMA "not to discuss the terms of this tentative agreement as negotiations continue." In other words, workers are being kept deliberately in the dark while the union is preparing a sellout by piecemeal.

The ILWU has been working with the PMA and the Biden administration, which has has intervened heavily in the negotiations, to keep workers on the job and prevent work stoppages. This is in spite of the fact that the PMA is reportedly pushing for major concessions on working hours and automation.

Significantly, the statement was the latest in a series of "joint releases" by the ILWU and the PMA, exposing the level of collusion between them. In June, the ILWU and PMA issued a joint statement declaring that there would be no strikes or lockouts. However, the formal expiration of the contract on July 1 means that its no-strike provision is no longer enforceable, and workers can legally strike at any time. But the PMA and the Biden administration are instead relying upon the ILWU to effectively ban strike action.

The fact that the ILWU is not releasing details of the agreement is not a negotiating ploy. After all, if the agreement contained significant gains, the ILWU would be eager to shout it from the rooftops. There is no reason to expect, moreover, that the deal contains any change in the status of casual workers. Although they make up roughly half of the workforce, they do not get health care benefits and have no contractual rights, including the right to vote on the contract.

Rather, the wall of silence on the details is a feature of a conspiracy between the pro-corporate union bureaucracy and the PMA, brokered by the Biden administration. To oppose it, workers must organize themselves into rank-and-file committees to fight for democratic control, including the livestreaming of all talks over the internet.

It is likely that the statement was meant less for dockworkers than to calm financial markets by reassuring them that progress is being made on a deal. Markets are following the talks with extreme anxiety, aware that any disruption of port operations would have an immediate effect on US and global supply chains.

The *World Socialist Web Site* previously wrote on the strategic importance with which the Biden administration regards the talks. In addition to the economic importance of the docks themselves, it cannot tolerate any work stoppages because it would encourage an increasingly restive American working class. Significantly, the joint announcement was made shortly after the end of statewide protests by independent port truckers, including a blockade which shut down operations at the Port of Oakland. Truckers are demanding an exemption from state law AB5, which reclassifies independent contractors across numerous sectors as employees, and which would effectively eliminate this segment of the trucking industry.

The ILWU issued terse statements last week indicating its opposition to the protests and its support for AB5. However, at least 100 dockworkers refused to cross the picket line in Oakland, according to press reports. This indicates not only substantial latent support for the

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truckers among dockworkers, but dissatisfaction and anger with the ILWU for keeping them on the job without a contract.

A work stoppage would also jeopardize the White House's plans for war, since the docks are a key point of transit for military equipment bound for overseas battlefields. In addition to the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the danger of war against China is increasing daily due to the provocative upcoming visit by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan.

The military importance of the contract talks was indicated in June when Biden made an appearance at the Port of Los Angeles, where he spoke on the contract talks from the deck of the World War II-era battleship USS Iowa. A subsequent news briefing on July 13 with the White House Port and Supply Chain Envoy, retired General Stephen Lyons, was also held on the retired warship. Lyons was joined by Port of Los Angeles director Gene Seroka.

Introducing "The General," Seroka said that that it was, "Great to see you, and it's great to be on the USS Iowa."

Lyons likewise said it was great to be on the battleship, a sign a "strength and freedom." On the negotiations between the ILWU and PMA he said: "The administration is watching as closely as can be watched without being a point of interference.' He added that Labor Secretary Marty Walsh is "in the lead and in contact with both parties."

Lyons says he got commitments "loud and clear" from "both presidents" (ILWU and PMA) to "get a contract in time and not impeding the flow of goods." He said both the PMA and the ILWU "understand the importance of achieving a contract [and] not impeding the flow of goods for Americans.

"The administration is watching this very closely and will continue to do that."

Seroka also commented on the unprecedented intervention of the Biden administration in ongoing negotiations. This was, he said, "to my knowledge, the first sitting president to visit with [the] leadership from both sides during an active contract negotiation."

Indicating the severe supply chain disruptions which are already underway, Seroka revealed that there are more than 29,000 rail containers sitting on the docks waiting to be moved, compared to a normal number of roughly 9,000. Rail cargo is sitting on the docks an average of seven and a half days, he said, compared to a normal turnaround time of two days; 20,000 of these containers have sat an average of nine days.

Lyons also said that they are closely watching the nationwide contract talks in the railroad industry, where workers have been without a contract for nearly three years. This is "something I talk with Secretary Walsh on frequently," he said. "We gotta get a contract."

A few days after the interview, Biden signed an executive order creating a Presidential Emergency Board to intervene in the talks, blocking a strike which had been authorized by 99.5 percent of the railroaders. Significantly, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and other rail unions had been pushing for Biden to intervene for months, effectively demanding that he illegalize a strike by their own members.

In reply to a question about 24/7 operations, Seroka admitted that he, Lyons, Frank Ponce De Leon of the ILWU and Rear Admiral Ann Phillips, who is the new head of the US Maritime Administration, were touring the "waterfront" on a "police boat" with Chief Tom Gazsi, Chief of the LA Port Police, that same day and that they all agreed on the need for 24/7 operations. Seroka added, "credit to the ILWU for coming in early, staying late, working these flex shifts."

In a CNBC interview last Friday Seroka again emphasized the close coordination between the ILWU bureaucracy and the PMA: "These two groups see it very similar. We've seen since the negotiations started, two joint releases from the PMA and ILWU to try and tell the market … what's going on.

"President Biden has met with President of ILWU Willie Adams, three times, face to face," he added.

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