

“The Rank-and-File needs to be brought back!”: As West Coast dockworkers approach two months without a contract, casual worker calls for unity

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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.

Wednesday will mark two full months since the contract expired for 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has kept workers on the job without a deal in that time, in maneuvers carried out closely with both the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the Biden Administration.

Frustration is growing among dockworkers at having been kept on the job without a contract while discussions take place behind closed doors. This year's contract talks, which press reports indicate may be stalled, could have major implications for the future of the workforce. Demands by the PMA for greater automation could threaten to eliminate whole swathes of more highly skilled, high seniority jobs.

A particular reservoir of opposition, however, is building among the casual workers, who comprise roughly half of the workforce. Casuals are not members of the ILWU and have no contractual rights, including the right to vote on the contract which will determine their every aspect of their work. They are forced to work as day laborers for years, sometimes a decade or more before being hired in as full timers.

A reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed a casual dockworker in Northern California. He spoke under condition of anonymity and will be referred to as Luke.

WSWS: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

LUKE: I work out of the Port of San Francisco. I'm a casual. I'm not part of the union right now because I'm not permanent, but I do dock work. When all the union people get their jobs and there's leftover jobs, then we get a shift. If they don't have any left then we don't get a shift. So basically, it's part-time.

WSWS: How often do you normally work?

LUKE: Well, it just depends. They go through the jobs every day. They'll come up and say we have 250 skilled and 50 non-skilled and it just depends on how many of the union people show

up and how many don't show up. If a lot of them show up, you don't work. If they don't, you got a chance for getting a shift for a day but it's not enough work to make a living and it's not enough work to not have another job.

WSWS: What's your relationship with the ILWU?

LUKE: They are the union but we are casuals, we are not permanent workers. You can go to them and ask for help, sometimes you get it, sometimes you can't, but you're not a union dues-paying member. They want you to function with all their "protests," all the fight for pay and all that, but they'll be quick to let you know that you're still a casual, which doesn't make sense. They want you to function as if you are a full-time member of the union when you're not. They're quick to let you know that you don't have any seniority and that you are a casual. It's kind of like being treated like a stepchild. You're part of the family but you're not blood. They'll be quick to let you know that.

WSWS: A lot of workers have been actually raising the question: Who's the ILWU protecting? Is it protecting its members or is it playing another side of the game? What are your thoughts?

LUKE: First of all, the union should not be working without a contract, because you're giving up your leverage; the work is still getting done at a less rate and you're working without a contract, which is dumb. You never work without a contract. I know that they'll go back and whatever the raise is they'll pay the difference for the hours that you work, but you give up your leverage, because if you didn't work and we factor out that everything shuts down, then the union will have more leverage.

They should not be working without a contract; that's just basic negotiation standards. You don't have a contract, you don't work. I'm not coming to work under the old provisions of the old contract if nothing's valid anymore. The contract's not valid, the contract has expired. So, they have no contract, so there's no working conditions, there's no rules, they're just going and they're just working under a continuous contract that's expired which makes absolutely no sense to me.

WSWS: The union has made joint statements with the PMA that there will be no strike. Who are they to decide? What if the

workers are not happy? Shouldn't they have their word?

LUKE: In my opinion the union is very weak and this is why the employer is not afraid of them and this is why they are able to get away with what they get away with. Until these unions start coming together, you're going to have these issues.

WSWS: What is the reason why there are still casuals? Shouldn't there just be workers, regular workers well paid with benefits and secure jobs?

LUKE: Yes, there should be, but because of the status quo and this is the way we always done it and the world will come to the end if we change the way we do it, it's that mindset. Nobody should be [dragged] along for 15 years for a promise of a union job. That's ridiculous. When you have a casual on the West Coast, it takes 4,000 hours to get to top pay right? When you have casuals that have 4,000 hours at top pay and they're still a casual, it's a problem with the system.

There's no way that somebody that's a casual that handles 4,000 hours should not be a registered longshoreman and even in the contract negotiations right now, nothing has been negotiated about the casuals. This makes absolutely no sense, but if you are a casual you have no say-so, none whatsoever, no say-so in that and the casual process [needs] to be done away with. Once you pass a drug test, you should go to work that day as a B-man whenever the process is over and I've been saying this for the longest.

WSWS: One possible device that workers could utilize is precisely uniting with different sections of the working class so that it's not just one section of the working class striking, but rather all of the sections in unison. Something like what happened in 1934 in San Francisco. It started with dockworkers and it spread through the city.

LUKE: Everybody, whether it be the airlines, whether it be the longshoremen, whether it be the truck drivers, they should all go on strike and then, when no plane will get off the ground, when no truck would roll, no ships would get unloaded, then that will get their attention.

They have this thing, "An injury to one is an injury to all," that's the ILWU slogan. But that's just something that they're saying, they're not living by it. So, if every transportation bus driver, railroad worker, dockworker, everybody, will come together, that's the only way you can stop this. There's no solidarity when we're so decentralized and that is part of the problem and this is why these companies are able to get away with what they get away with because everything is decentralized.

WSWS: What's your experience with inflation? If you work in San Francisco, you must be paying a pretty penny for rent or mortgage.

LUKE: My experience with inflation is the cost of living, it never catches up with inflation. It didn't catch it up when I was in the military, it doesn't catch it up now and it's not going to catch it up with this deal that they're making right now. Every contract that's been negotiated, they're giving the companies concessions against the workers. So, 22 percent over five years, that is 4 percent a year, that's horrible. The Consumer Price Index right now, is increasing at 8, 9 or 10 percent yearly.

WSWS: What sort of contract do you think the ILWU will end up presenting?

LUKE: I'm anxious to see it too and I could tell you right now the wages are not going to be there. They haven't negotiated a contract since 2014 and what they fail to realize is that every time you extend the contract, you're losing money. They went seven to eight years without having [a contract]. No contract should probably go over three years. I don't know where they get this five-year contract at, because when you do a contract for five years, you don't make any changes, there's no changes to deter the conditions. You're locked for five years. You should never lock yourself for over 36 months so at least after that 36th month you get back what you lost.

They haven't had a contract I think since 2014 and they're talking about a \$20 raise over two years. That addition is ridiculous. You've got guys that work for waste management that drive these trash trucks making \$65 an hour. We're on the shore, which you can get killed at any time, any minute; a container drops off a crane, a line snaps on a ship, a lashing falls and hits you in the head and it's \$40-something an hour, but that pay should be about \$65 an hour and time and a half for the overtime.

WSWS: I want to share with you this initiative of Rank-and-File Committees as we are developing them to unite different sections of the working class in a common struggle. What do you think of this?

LUKE: It needs to be done and it needs to be off the ground because the unions are not doing it. Some of the union guys, and this is just my personal opinion, some of them got into the industry because their fathers, mothers and family members that passed along, but they're not educated enough to understand what's going on. This is why this stuff keeps happening year after year. We do have rank-and-file with the ILWU but that's just a synonym they're using. They're not doing it appropriately and that needs to be brought back.

The Rank-and-File needs to be brought back! It's something that needs to be developed, it's something that needs to be governed by the workers and it's something that needs to put fear in these employers. The employer has no fear of the union these days. If the union doesn't do it, we need better representation so I'm all for it.



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