

As US West Coast port workers toil without a contract

Canadian dock workers go on strike, leading to closure of major coal terminal

Jacob Crosse, Carl Bronski
19 September 2022

Early Saturday, September 17, 200 dock and warehouse workers, affiliated with Local 502 of the International Warehouse and Longshore Union (ILWU), walked off the job, shutting down Westshore Terminals Ltd. and the Delta coal port, located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Opened in 1970, the Deltaport specializes in exporting coal mined in Canada and the US globally.

Workers at the vital port had been laboring without a contract since January 2022. Despite not having a contract, the ILWU kept workers on the job for nine months before a strike notice was issued by ILWU Local 502 plant Chair Randy Chartier on September 16.

The strike notice followed a previous “bargaining update” issued by Chartier that same day which declared that “[T]alks between ILWU Local 502 and Westshore Terminals Ltd have broken down.”

In a flyer handed out at the picket line on Saturday and distributed by ILWU members online, the union notes its decades-long service in suppressing the class struggle, bragging that in 52 years “ILWU Local 502 has never had to Strike at Westshore.”

The statement claimed that the union was “forced into a historical first-time position at Westshore, having to withdraw our labour to get a Fair Contract.”

The statement notes that dockworkers, like all sections of the working class in Canada, the US and around the world, have had to labor through “an unprecedented pandemic, cost of living increases and skyrocketing inflation.”

Canadian workers, like their US brothers and sisters, have seen their paychecks evaporate in the face of over 8 percent inflation rates. The statement notes that during these “difficult years, Westshore Terminal has not suffered” and, in fact, has “increased its Dividend three times and issued

two special Dividends,” totaling C\$441,000,000.

The following day, September 17, 2022, ILWU International President Willie Adams issued a statement expressing “solidarity with striking workers at Westshore Terminals.”

In the US, the ILWU has been working hand in glove with the Biden administration since last October to prevent any work stoppage on the docks, especially at the crucial ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, lest the “economy”—that is, Wall Street’s profits—suffer.

In an obviously false statement, Adams claimed that “workers at Westshore Terminals who are striking for a fair contract do not walk alone.” In fact, no other ILWU local in Canada or the US has joined their brothers and sisters on strike, despite the fact that the issues facing the Deltaport dockworkers—*inflation, COVID-19 and longer working hours*—are the same issues that confront workers across North America and around the world.

A united struggle of dockworkers on the West Coast would quickly paralyze the economies of both Canada and the US and demonstrate thereby which class produces all of society’s wealth, and therefore should decide how it is allocated. But that is the last thing the ILWU bureaucrats want. Their empty statements of solidarity are aimed at preventing, not initiating action to broaden the Westshore Terminal workers’ struggle.

In the more than two months since the contract for over 22,000 US West Coast dockworkers expired, the ILWU has yet to hold or even set a date for a strike authorization vote.

The Westshore Terminal, home of the Deltaport, is Canada’s largest port for moving coal. Westshore Terminals claims workers at the port handle more than 33 million

tonnes of coal a year, from mines in British Columbia, Alberta, and the Power River Basin in Wyoming and Montana, USA.

Prior to the strike, the port operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to handling coal from Canada and the Northwestern United States, the facility has begun to transition to handling potash mined in Saskatchewan. Canada is the world's largest exporter of potash and supplies 80 percent of America's potash fertilizer.

Westshore Terminals Limited Partnership is owned by the Westshore Terminal Investment Corporation, whose largest shareholder is Jim Pattison. With an estimated net worth exceeding \$12 billion, the 93-year-old is one of the richest people in Canada.

In addition to the coal port, Pattison owns the supermarket chain Save-On-Foods and companies that deal in advertising, food service, logging and auto sales. Pattison's billions have been "earned" from extracting as much surplus value as possible from the labor of tens of thousands of workers.

In May of 2020, Pattison enraged thousands of grocery store workers when he cut their meager \$2 pandemic hazard pay. Pattison, like the vast majority of billionaires throughout the world, has seen his wealth skyrocket during the course of the pandemic, which has claimed over 45,000 Canadian lives.

While it is unknown how many Canadian dockworkers have died throughout the course of the pandemic, earlier this year bureaucrats from the ILWU and International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) acknowledged that at least 70 workers had needlessly perished from the virus in the last two years.

Intolerable working conditions, including the elimination of the eight-hour workday, compelled longshore workers at the Port of Quebec in Quebec City to overwhelming vote for a strike on August 30.

In response to the militancy shown by the 81 longshore workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), their employer, La Societe des arimmeurs de Quebec, locked them out on September 15. The union was in a legal strike position beginning on September 11 but did not call out its members, leaving the initiative for a lockout in the hands of the employer.

With nearly 700,000 members, CUPE is Canada's largest

union. Its members work in health care, education, municipalities, utilities, transport and the airlines.

The Société des arimmeurs de Québec said it triggered the lockout because it was "placed in an untenable position" and that the dockworkers' pressure tactics were "growing every day."

"The positions of the two sides are irreconcilable and the demands of the union impossible to meet in the current context," they declared in a statement.

Alongside demanding a wage rise that defends their living standards against the current and projected inflationary spike, workers are opposing the employer's demand that they accept a grueling and unsafe 12-hour shift schedule.

The Port of Quebec processes over 28 million tonnes of cargo a year. It is one of the top five ports in the country. It also is an important tourism hub, with more than 236,000 visitors passing through each year on international cruises.

The struggle at the Port of Quebec docks follows on the heels of a major battle at the Port of Montreal over grueling work schedules, a vicious disciplinary procedure, unsafe working conditions and speedup. With the connivance of the CUPE leadership, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government criminalized a strike by the 1,150 Montreal longshoremen after just four days in April 2021.

The Société des arimmeurs de Québec has indicated it intends to weather the lockout by diverting shipments to other ports, including Montreal. Its expectation is that the unions will instruct workers to effectively scab on their locked-out Quebec City colleagues.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact