

ILWU compels dockworkers to labor without a contract three months after expiration

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Anger is building among the 22,000 dockworkers in the United States at 29 West Coast ports who have been working over three months without a contract since the previous agreement expired on July 1, 2022.

During this whole period the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has refused to set a strike deadline and resisted demands from workers to even call a strike authorization vote.

“Striking seems is the only option, it seems like to me,” one West Coast dockworker told the WSWs earlier this year.

Instead of preparing for a showdown with the immensely profitable Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), the ILWU, under the watchful eye of the Biden administration, has released several joint statements with the PMA affirming their desire for no “work stoppages,” lest “the economy” that is Wall Street profits be impinged upon.

Dockworkers who have labored, and died, throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, have been resisting demands by the PMA for major concessions on working hours and automation. The PMA has made it clear that it intends to eliminate the highest-paid positions, such as crane operator, through automation and increase the length of the working day through a “double flex” shift, ensuring 24/7 operations on the ports.

Through the elimination of higher paying jobs, the PMA seeks to expand the pool of so-called casual dockworkers.

The ILWU under Harry Bridges, in the October 18, 1960 Mechanization and Modernization Agreement, implemented a tier system to divide workers between A

and B classifications, with the bottom third of the workforce classified as casual. These casual workers have no benefits, no guaranteed hours and can’t even vote on the contract that will determine their working conditions.

That such a divisive arrangement was ever agreed to in the first place by the ILWU underscores its role as labor contractors on behalf of the PMA, not as a genuine workers organization fighting in the interest of the workers it purports to represent.

Despite the PMA’s onerous demands the ILWU had made it clear, even before the expiration of the contract, that a strike would not occur. In mid-June, two weeks before the expiration of the contract, the ILWU and the PMA issued a joint statement meant to reassure corporate interests that while they “are unlikely to reach a deal before the July 1 expiration of the current agreement ... [n]either party is preparing for a strike or a lockout, contrary to speculation in news reports.”

This ILWU and PMA joint statement, that essentially has a no strike/lockout pledge, was issued shortly after President Biden’s unannounced visit on June 10, 2022 to the Port of Los Angeles. During his visit Biden blamed rampant inflation on Russian President Vladimir Putin and condemned foreign-owned shipping companies for extracting exorbitant profits from US consumers.

While in Los Angeles, Biden made it a point to meet with Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka and Port of Long Beach Executive Director Mario Cordero, as well as Democratic politicians and ILWU officials.

After Biden’s speech, Gene Seroka told the *Business Insider*, “We’re working on a daily basis with the White House, the cabinet members and key policy staff. Those folks are also keeping a keen eye on labor negotiations.” He emphasized that while he did not see a contract being

completed by July 1, this was no cause for concern. “Personally, from my vantage point, I do not see a strike on the horizon.”

“Both sides are eagerly working at the table,” Seroka added, saying that there has been “great attention from the president himself, the Biden-Harris administration, the cabinet level ... everybody is working on the ground here.”

One element in Biden’s speech that came across clearly was the degree to which the docks are seen as central to the US economy and the military logistical needs of American imperialism. The twin hubs of Los Angeles and Long Beach, that handle 42 percent of all US containerized trade with East Asia, play a critical and indispensable role in facilitating the delivery of war material to Taiwan and Ukraine.

Because of the central role in the supply chain that the West Coast dockers play, the Biden administration is fully prepared to follow the role of its predecessors in using state repression against opposition from these workers. In the postwar era, the White House repeatedly invoked the Taft-Hartley Act and other strike-breaking laws against dockworkers, including in 1948, 1971 and 2002. In the last instance, then-President George W. Bush issued a federal injunction even though the PMA had locked out the workers.

Since the expiration of the contract on July 1, the ILWU and the PMA have worked together to suppress any strike activity or other actions by workers that could in any way impede the flow of commerce. Despite these efforts, however, by mid-July Independent truck drivers had engaged in demonstrations at the ports of Los Angeles and Oakland to protest AB5, a newly enacted law that threatened their livelihoods. These protests, by a few hundred truckers, shut down these ports for several days.

These shutdowns, caused by a relatively small number of truckers, illustrated the overwhelming power that 22,000 dockworkers could potentially unleash. It has been the unholy alliance of the ILWA, the PMA and the US government, however, that has prevented such power from being utilized to achieve the needs of all dockworkers.

By late July, fearing that the limited action by a small number of truckers could motivate and inspire dockworkers to launch a West Coast shutdown, the ILWU announced “a tentative agreement on terms for health benefits, subject to agreement on the other issues in the negotiations.”

No details concerning this “agreement” have ever been

released, with the ILWU claiming they have an accord with the PMA “not to discuss the terms of this tentative agreement as negotiations continue.”

On September 16, 2022, 200 Canadian dock and warehouse workers went on strike, shutting down Westshore Terminals Ltd. and the Delta coal port, located in Vancouver, British Columbia. These workers had been working without a contract since January 2022 when their prior agreement had expired.

The following day, ILWU International President Willie Adams issued a statement expressing “solidarity with striking workers at Westshore Terminals.” Adams’ “solidarity,” however, did not extend to calling upon all 22,000 US dockworkers to join in this strike and to shut down all West Coast ports from Canada to the Mexican border.

Isolated from their fellow dockworkers, just after midnight on October 9, ILWU Local 502 announced a “tentative collective agreement” had been reached and that operations would resume that day. No details of the agreement were made public.

On September 28, 2022 the ILWU did engage in a work “slowdown.” It, however, had nothing to do with the expired contract or taking action against the PMA, but instead involved an intra-union jurisdictional dispute over work that had been allocated to the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW).

This record demonstrates that the only unity the ILWU has displayed is with the PMA and the government. At every step it has subordinated the interests of dockworkers to the economic interests of the PMA and the ruling class.

Dockworkers must build rank-and-file committees uniting full-time and casual workers and independent from the ILWU bureaucracy to oversee the negotiations and launch a real struggle in support of their demands. These committees must prepare for strike action and reach out to brother dockworkers in the US, Canada and Mexico, along with truckers, railroaders and other workers in struggle.



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