After third rejection of contract proposal, Port of Mobile dock workers poised to strike

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Work at the Port of Mobile? Tell the World Socialist Web Site *why you're ready to strike by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Around 800 members of International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1410 at the Port of Mobile in Alabama are poised to strike this week after rejecting a new company contract for the third time last month. Workers at the CSA Equipment Company have been without a contract since October 2018, and already voted down two previous proposals in October 2020 and April 2021. While the union is continuing to negotiate with the company, workers will strike if no deal is reached by midnight on October 20.

Local 1410 President Mark Bass reported to Al.com that three of the membership's demands are: union control over tying up vessels, more workers assigned per unit, and retroactive payout of benefits and pensions since the last contract expired. For four years, including three during the COVID-19 pandemic, union members have had their benefits and pension funds frozen, but CSA has agreed to backpay only from October 2020.

CSA, formed in 1999 out of partnership between parent company Cooper/T. Smith Stevedoring and SSA Marine, is one of several bulk, container, cargo, and rail terminals that operate out of the 3,600-acre deep-water Port of Mobile. A strike by ILA members would be a major development which would impact Alabama's infrastructure expansion projects and the entire national supply chain.

It would also objectively undermine attempts by the Biden administration to prevent strikes and enforce substandard contracts in critical infrastructure with the assistance of the union bureaucracy. For the past three months, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the West Coast counterpart of the ILA, has kept workers on the job and in the dark without a contract, in talks with unprecedented involvement from the White House. Biden also brokered a sellout contract last month with the two largest rail unions in a bid to prevent a national strike, which workers are now voting on. Just as with the Mobile workers, railroaders nationwide have been working without a contract for three years.

The potential strike in Mobile is part of a broader international movement by dockworkers. In addition to the 22,000 ILWU workers on the west coast, 200 Canadian ILWU members at Westshore Terminals Ltd. and the Delta coal port in Vancouver walked off the job in September. German port workers took part in a national strike earlier this year against the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS). In England, dockworkers in Liverpool and Felixstowe (the UK's largest ports), which handle 60 percent of UK container freight combined, are engaged in a bitter struggle.

Established in 1928, the Port of Mobile has become one of the top 20 tonnage, dry bulk, and container ports in the US as of 2020 statistics provided by the US Department of Transportation. With the facility playing an increasingly prominent role in the global shipping and transportation supply chains in recent years, politicians from federal down to the local level have accelerated investments in the port and its interconnected logistical networks since 2020.

One of the recent investment programs is the Alabama Seaport Modernization Program, a $365.7 million, four-year port expansion project initiated in May 2021 and overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Its aim is to widen and deepen the Port's waterways to 50 feet in order to facilitate the handling of larger cargo ships.

Another is the Alabama-USA Corridor development project. Announced at the beginning of this year, it is a massive multi-million-dollar project co-directed by Norfolk Southern, one of the five Class I rail carriers that have terminals at the port. Its aim is to increase the rail capacity of Norfolk Southern's 3B line, stretching from Mobile up into the Birmingham area, in order "to strengthen the resiliency of the supply chain in the Southeastern United States," according to the project's website.

The project is directly overseen by the state's Republican Governor Kay Ivey, the state Commerce and Transportation departments, the Business Council of Alabama (whose First

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Vice Chairman and Executive Committee member is Angus Cooper III of Cooper/T. Smith Corporation), and Birmingham Business Alliance (one of whose investors is Norfolk Southern). US Senator Tommy Tuberville and House Representatives Robert Aderholt, Barry Moore, and Mike Rogers are also major supporters.

Speaking on the significance of the project, Ivey said, "[w]orking together with the Port in Mobile to build out our infrastructure to move the commerce for Alabama and the greater southeastern region of the country must be one of our top priorities." President of Norfolk Southern Alan Shaw stated that the "A-USA Corridor is an innovative public-private partnership that will strengthen the nation's supply chain at a critical time and boost the regional economy."

Additionally, the Port of Mobile has received over $100 million from the federal government this year to expand its rail and freight capacity. This includes over $50 million allotted to a joint construction project between the Port and CSX rail carrier for an inland intermodal transfer facility (ICTF) in Montgomery that will increase the speed of transit between the Port and the state capital.

Combined, these projects are fueling the rapid uptick in volume the Port has handled over the past year, with the Port announcing last week that it handled 56,545 20-foot containers last month, "[surpassing] July's record of 52,911 20-foot containers, making September the largest throughput month since APM Terminals' container operations began in 2008."

ILA Local 1410 also has members contracted with APM Terminals, whose website boasts that it "operates one of the world's most comprehensive port networks," with terminals and inland services stretching across five continents. Its terminals in Mobile are also in the process of a $104 million expansion.

Managing director of APM Terminals Mobile Brian Harold commented on the expansion, "APM Terminals is extremely excited by this next step. This is our third expansion in six years, which underscores the high level of demand by the shipping community to utilize the Mobile gateway." Mobile County Commission President Connie Hudson added that the "investment is further proof that Mobile County is the gateway for containerized cargo along the central gulf coast."

The Port's expansion projects are a response to the ensnarled supply chain. Beth Branch, chief commercial officer for the Alabama Port Authority, stated that "[w]e talk daily with shippers who are actively shifting their supply chain to the Port of Mobile because their bottom line depends on it," adding that the Port is "here to help companies reduce the landed cost of their goods and to offer reliability."

These increased investments and demands on the Port are finding their reflection in increased exploitation. ILA members that work for CSA at the Port have smaller work crews assigned to each unit than their counterparts that work at APM Terminals. Compounding this is a modern-day "shape up" system where ILA members at CSA only work when a ship contracted with the company enters the docks. Because of this, job consistency is one of the demands of the workers, just as it was for the earlier generations of ILA members.

ILA members confront a union bureaucracy that does everything in its power to prevent a strike from happening and, if one takes place, works day and night to ensure its isolation and suppression.

With 200 local affiliates at 100 seaports, the ILA is "the largest union of maritime workers in North America, representing upwards of 65,000 longshoremen on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, Great Lakes, major U.S. rivers, Puerto Rico, Eastern Canada, and the Bahamas," according to its website. Its International President, Harold J. Daggett, was first elected in 2011 and is only "the ninth president in the ILA's 124 years of existence." Department of Labor filings indicate that he took home over $710,000 last year. Other bureaucrats in the upper echelons of the union also make six-figure salaries.

Notoriously anti-communist, the ILA declares in its history page that its "patriotism runs deeper than the personal convictions of the Union's dynamic leaders—it is an expression of the central role longshoring has played in this nation's history." This "patriotism," that is, the defense of American business interests, is bound up with the ILA's $0 in expenditures on strike benefits last year, while $866,000 was outlaid for "political activities and lobbying."

To wage a successful strike that will not be blindsided by the union bureaucrats means developing the organizational means through which rank-and-file control can be enforced over the entire process, including the central question of whether or not a strike will take place. There can be no doubt that, both under pressure from and in collaboration with the state government in Montgomery and with Washington, the ILA will be working overtime this week to find some means of avoiding a strike, or of limiting its scope and impact if that proves to be impossible.

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