Mobile, Alabama port workers in powerful position in lead-up to strike deadline

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After working without a contract since October 2018 and voting down three previous company proposals brought to them by the union, around 800 members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) are primed to go on strike after midnight on October 20 if the union does not work out a deal with the CSA Equipment Company beforehand.

The demands being made by the membership are control over the tying up of vessels contracted to CSA, more workers assigned per unit, and retroactive payout of benefits and pensions from the company since the last contract expired.

The dockworkers, members of ILA Local 1410, are in an immensely powerful position. The growing significance of the Port of Mobile within the regional and national supply chain cannot be understated, and a strike would immediately win the widespread support of dockworkers around the world, as well as workers in other critical sectors of industry such as the railroads. It is for this reason that Mobile dockworkers should prepare to strike on Friday, and send the broadest appeal to their working class brothers and sisters to join them in the process.

Just under half of the ILA's 65,000 members work on ports throughout the Gulf Coast and South Atlantic along the east coast. It has members at some of the largest ports in the contiguous US, such as in Houston and southern Louisiana.

Since APM Terminals launched its container operations at Mobile in 2008, Director and CEO of the Alabama Port Authority John C. Driscoll stated last month that the Port has gone on to become "the 11th largest U.S. Seaport."

Over 160,000 jobs in the state are directly or indirectly connected to the Port's operations, such as Amazon and Hyundai, with Driscoll commenting, "there is not a single county in Alabama that doesn't have some connection to the Port."

Importing an assortment of retail products and exporting a wide variety of products such as poultry, wood pulp, lumber and factory components, the Port plays a critical role in the regional and national supply chain.

Class I railroad carriers BNSF, CSX, Kansas City Southern, Norfolk Southern, and Canadian National have terminals at the Port. Driscoll recently stated in an interview, "Products can get from the Port of Mobile through Jackson, Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee and ultimately to Chicago in three days," as well as up to Canada. Rail traffic at the port has increased by 150 percent as of this year.

This demonstrates, Driscoll concluded, that the port is "strategically positioned to offer service directly into the middle of the country, providing an uncongested and fluid gateway into key North American markets in less time and at less expense than other coastal ports."

The volume of container handling and movement at the Port has rapidly increased since last year. Workers at the Port are on pace to surpass 500,000 TEUs (twenty-foot containers, a standard of measurement in shipping based on a single 20-foot cargo unit) moved this year, over 15 percent higher than last year. With a $104 million expansion project currently underway for APM Terminals, as well as two other major expansion projects involving Norfolk Southern and CSX, the company's goal is to reach one million TEUs moved annually by 2025.

With intermodal rail and refrigerated cargo transportation at the Port up by 141 and 16 percent, respectively, since September 2021, the Port "has been the fastest-growing port in the last five years," according to Driscoll.

This development accounts for an uptick in the rerouting of cargo ships from the larger docks on the West Coast to the Gulf Coast. This process, however, is primarily a result of the ruling capitalist class's disastrous

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COVID-19 policies and their concomitant disruptions to the global supply chain.

Commenting on the growing importance of the seaports along the Gulf Coast, Margaret Kidd, a professor and program director of supply chain and logistics technology at the University of Houston, said, “You can’t have 40 percent of all containers coming in from Asia in LA-Long Beach.” This accounts for the massive expansion projects currently underway not only at the Port of Mobile (the combined aim of which is to turn the Port into the deepest of all the container terminals along the Gulf), but also in Houston, which launched a $1 billion channel-widening project this year.

Underscoring the strategic importance of the Port of Mobile, Driscoll stated, “Alabama is in one of the best positions geographically, politically and economically to be the answer to the country’s supply chain struggles that we have all witnessed over the past couple of years.”

It is for these reasons that the corporations that operate out of the Port, the federal down to the local government, and the entire AFL-CIO union apparatus are working around the clock to prevent a strike by workers in the critical sectors of industry dependent on the Port.

The fact that five Class I railroads are operating at the port no doubt factors into these calculations. With their eyes nervously following the negotiations between the carriers, government and union bureaucrats to suppress the opposition among railroaders, Maggie Oliver, a spokesperson for the Port, said last month, “We are hopeful that these negotiations will soon lead to a resolution with minimal disruption in service.”

Emphasizing the impact a national rail strike would have on the Port, and the inevitable reverberations of a strike resonating with dockworkers, Driscoll said that a rail strike “would be impactful, obviously, because rail—we have nine railroads that touch the port.” In case of a strike, he added that products would not be able to be moved “until the rails are back online.”

Right-wing US Senator Tommy Tuberville, one of the many federal backers of the Alabama-USA Corridor development project, stated last month that “the [dock] unions need to work this out,” echoing Biden and his Labor Secretary Marty Walsh that a strike on the railroads would be “unfathomable.”

Because of the inextricable interconnections between logistics, shipping and transportation industries, and therefore the direct interdependency between strikes in these industries, the sentiments of the ruling class towards a rail strike are identical to those of a potential dockworkers strike: It must be prevented at all costs so as to protect the profits of Wall Street.

These sentiments are shared by the union bureaucracy. For example, Alabama AFL-CIO Executive Board member Daryl Dewberry, formerly United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) District 20 vice president, is currently fulfilling his second term on the Alabama Port Authority’s Board of Directors. Given the UMWA’s ruthless isolation and suppression of the Warrior Met strike in Brookwood, which began in April 2021 after UMWA members rejected a wage-cutting tentative agreement proffered to them by the bureaucrats by a staggering margin, 1,006 to 45 , there is no doubt that Dewberry is working hand-in-glove with the ILA to prevent any word about a potential strike escaping the Port of Mobile.

The ILA, for its part, has maintained radio silence since announcing the strike deadline. Sitting on $82 million in assets, the ILA has more than enough in membership dues money to comfortably fund a powerful strike not only in Mobile, but accompanying actions by all of its members throughout North America in solidarity with Local 1410.

Dockworkers must be on guard against any attempt to keep them on the job past the deadline without a contract which meets their demands. This means developing organizational structures organized by the rank and file to enforce democratic control of their struggle.

The membership’s rejection of the union-backed contract proposal is part of a growing wave of opposition to sellout contracts brought forward by the union bureaucracy, including in votes of machinists and maintenance workers on the railroads. At WestRock’s Mahrt Mill paper mill in Cottonton, Alabama, around 500 United Steelworkers members are entering their third week of a lockout after rejecting a contract for the second time on October 1.

It is to their fellow members in the ILA and ILWU, as well as to their brothers and sisters in rail, coal and auto that Port of Mobile workers must turn outwards to and link up with for the purpose of carrying out a combined struggle against the companies for better wages and safer working conditions if their struggle is not to be isolated and betrayed by the union apparatus.

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