

International Longshoremen's Association to resume negotiations at Port of Mobile, preventing strike

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Less than 24 hours before 800 members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1410 at the Port of Mobile were set to go on strike against the CSA Equipment Company, The Journal of Commerce online (JOC) reported that the union and the company "have agreed to return to the bargaining table for contract talks that will be overseen by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS)".

Given that Local 1410 members have already rejected three previous company proposals over the last four years, during which the union kept workers on the job without a contract while their benefits and pension funds remained frozen, workers need to recognize that to wage a real fight for their demands, they must take matter into their own hands.

Though, according to the JOC, the company and the union "plan to offer a schedule for when talks can take place with an FMCS mediator," no schedule, let alone any official statement from the ILA or its South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District (SAGCD) about the situation at the Port has yet to be published.

ILA members should recognize this as yet another stalling tactic by the union aimed at dissipating the mounting opposition at the port to unsafe working conditions.

Local 1410 President Mark Bass, on behalf of the entire union apparatus, is seeking to facilitate the enforcement of a company and state-backed sellout before negotiations begin for a new ILA-wide master contract at the end of this year. To oppose this conspiracy, workers should instead do everything in their power to break through the union's information blackout, make the broadest appeal to their fellow working class brothers and sisters for joint action against the companies, and establish a new organizational means to carry forward the struggle.

ILA members at the Port of Mobile must see through the bureaucrats' lies and maneuvers. In the lead up to the Thursday deadline, Bass stated "We can't continue to kick

the can down the road, so we have voted to strike." However, he also made clear the union's willingness to continue negotiations with CSA right up to the strike deadline of midnight on October 20, which has now been extended.

Fearing the impact a strike at the Port—a critical facility—would have on the regional and national supply chain—and the possibility that it could spark a broader movement—the union preemptively capitulated to the company with the aim of stifling workers' opposition via federal intervention.

In addition, the union has enacted a divide and conquer strategy on behalf of the multinational companies that operate out of the port. Speaking out against workers' demand to assert control over the tying up of vessels contracted to CSA, Bass stated, "We don't want their [non-union] operations to capture the work from the ILA."

Container operations company APM Terminals, where Local 1410 members are also contracted, communicated to the JOC that "its contract with Local 1410 has a no-strike clause and that it has a 'strong and prosperous' relationship with the union."

Workers should take the bureaucrats' invocation of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) as an alarm bell that the union is actively seeking to betray their struggle.

Established in 1947 as part of the Taft-Hartley Act (itself passed by both the Democrats and Republicans following the unions' betrayal of the 1945-1946 strike wave), the FMCS has since been requested multiple times over the past decade alone by the AFL-CIO apparatus so as to conceal the betrayal of each struggle with the legal cover provided by the capitalist state.

The purpose has been to further isolate and atomize workers during disputes with the companies while keeping members in the dark throughout backroom pro-company negotiations that the union bureaucrats claim are mediated in good faith by the "neutral" state arbiter.

In 2011, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) requested FMCS intervention, green-lit by the Obama administration, so as to force through a pro-company agreement on its 45,000 members that struck the multinational telecommunications conglomerate, Verizon.

More recently, the United Auto Workers (UAW) called on the FMCS during a graduate student workers strike at New York University; the United Steelworkers (USW) requested the FMCS during a lockout of its members at the ExxonMobil refinery and packaging plant in Beaumont, Texas (which the company refused); and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 700 requested the FMCS after its 8,000 members at Kroger grocery stores throughout the Indianapolis area rejected a tentative agreement.

All of these struggles were ultimately betrayed by the respective unions involved, which all oversaw the imposition of pro management agreements.

In both 2015 and 2019, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) requested the FMCS to mediate disputes with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). Commenting in 2019, then FMCS Acting Director John Pinto stated, “This is almost a text book example of following the blueprint of FMCS best practices to a successful conclusion at the bargaining table.” That “conclusion,” has been the continuing efforts by the union, PMA, and the Biden administration to abrogate the right of ILWU members to strike and to keep them working indefinitely without a contract.

A similar process is taking place in the ongoing struggle by railroaders against the Class I carriers, five of which have terminals at the Port of Mobile.

In early September, the federal National Mediation Board (NMB) called representatives from the railroad unions to Washington, DC for three days of government-mediated talks in a bid to avert a nationwide rail strike. On the first day of talks, US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh reportedly told the unions: “Don’t mess with the nation’s fragile economy weeks ahead of mid-term congressional elections as neither Congress nor the Biden Administration will like it.”

The talks broke down without any agreement being reached, but as the World Socialist Web Site made clear: These talks are not “negotiations” but a tripartite conspiracy between the railroads, the unions and the government to enforce the contract before it reaches the point of Congress intervening.

This same conspiracy is being carried out behind the backs of Local 1410 members. Shortly before the October 20 strike deadline in Mobile, the ILA posted on its Facebook page

notice of a meeting that took place between Walsh and ILA representatives in Miami. There is every reason to believe that Walsh delivered a similar message to the ILA bureaucrats in Miami as the one he delivered to the rail unions in Washington.

As the WSWS wrote previously, 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.

A strike at the Port of Mobile would unfold against a broader international movement by dockworkers. Both SSA Marine (one of the parent companies of CSA Equipment Company) and APM Terminals have branches at ports throughout South Africa, where members of the South African United National Transport Union (UNTU) and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) were recently engaged in a months-long pay dispute against the freight transport company Transnet Port Terminals (TPT).

ILWU workers on the west coast and in Canada, port workers in Germany, and dockworkers in Liverpool and Felixstowe, are all engaged in bitter struggles against the companies. The latter are taking place amidst a historic crisis of class rule in the UK, where the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party are working overtime to prevent a revolutionary situation there from accumulating into a general strike that could threaten the whole capitalist state structure.

If their struggle is not to be further isolated and betrayed by the union apparatus, dockworkers must take the fight into their own hands by following the lead of workers in rail, auto and other industries by organizing rank-and-file committees independent of the ILA apparatus. Port of Mobile workers must turn to their true allies, fellow dockworkers in the US and globally as well as to their working class brothers and sisters in rail, coal and auto, to wage a combined fight for decent pay and safe working conditions.



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