

Major disruption at Port of Oakland, California after dockworkers walk off the job

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On Wednesday morning, November 2, hundreds of clerks in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 34, walked off the job at the Port of Oakland.

While no other work actions took place at the other 28 West Coast ports in which ILWU workers labor at, the port workers' actions Wednesday immediately led to the shutdown of three major terminals.

The closure of the terminals sent shock-waves through the business press, terrified at the prospect that the clerks' actions were a harbinger of a mass strike from dockworkers.

However, by 6 p.m. dockworkers returned to the port and operations began to resume.

The following day, the Port of Oakland released a statement saying that: "Yesterday's labor action closed three of our international marine terminals. Our domestic terminal remained open. Operations resumed by yesterday evening and today we expect continued normal shipping operations."

Port spokespeople further said they are "hopeful the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) can resolve their issues so that the flow of international commerce is not further impacted."

Local media reported, however, that a spokesperson for ILWU denied the walkouts were an official action of the union despite the stalled negotiations with the PMA.

Sean Farley, the president of ILWU Local 34, later clarified that the walkout had nothing to do with contract negotiations, but instead was about workers not being paid the proper amount of wages owed in a timely manner.

Farley explained to *SFGATE* that among 240 clerks at the Port of Oakland, there are more than 200 outstanding wage claims dating back to June. Some clerks are only owed a few hours of work, but others are owed more than \$1,000.

According to Farley, normally the ILWU would take the PMA to arbitration over this matter. But because ILWU clerks are working without a contract right now, arbitration is not possible.

"They're cutting back their wages after they already worked. And that's unacceptable," Farley told *SFGATE*. "Nobody works for free," he added.

Neither Farley nor any other ILWU union official, however, have ever explained what is then preventing all 22,000 West Coast longshoremen who have been working without a contract, and no raises, since July 1, from walking out and shutting down all the ports indefinitely until a livable contract is obtained.

The answer to this fundamental question is revealed by how the ILWU and the PMA have worked together since the July 1 contract expiration to suppress any strike activity or other actions by workers that could in any way impede the flow of commerce. The PMA and ILWU have released multiple joint statements promising "no strikes or lockouts," an enormous gift by the ILWU bureaucracy to the PMA bosses.

Despite the best efforts of the PMA and ILWU to keep a lid on the class struggle and keep the ports operating throughout negotiations before bringing forward a sell-out contract, workers, driven by sky-high inflation and attacks on their working conditions, have a different agenda.

In mid-July, independent truck drivers engaged in demonstrations at the ports of Los Angeles and Oakland in opposition to AB5 legislation. The newly enacted law threatened the truckers' livelihoods by reclassifying them as "employees," as opposed to independent contractors. These protests, by just a few hundred truckers, drew support from dockworkers and severely hampered operations at the ports for several days.

In addition, for three weeks starting 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. The union was obligated to call the strike as anger among the dockworkers grew due to being forced to labor without a contract since January of this year.

Although these Canadian workers are also represented by the ILWU, the union bureaucracy isolated this struggle and prevented 22,000 US dockworkers from joining this strike which would have shut down all West Coast ports from Canada

to the Mexican border.

Two weeks ago, in Alabama, as 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 had "agreed to return to the bargaining table for contract talks that will be overseen by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS)."

The ILA carried out this latest betrayal after its members had already rejected three previous company proposals over the last four years, during which the union has kept workers on the job without a contract while their benefits and pension funds remained frozen.

Recognizing the impact that a strike at the Mobile port would have on the regional and national supply chain and how it could ignite a West Coast dockworkers strike, the company and the union sought refuge through the time consuming and meaningless federal mediation process.

On October 24, 2022, Gene Seroka, the Executive Director of the Port of Los Angeles was interviewed on CNBC about the consequences of a potential nationwide rail strike as well as the reasons for a significant decrease in cargo volume at the Los Angeles Port.

Seroka first explained that the Port of Los Angeles is not a warehouse but a transit facility. "Cargo moving out by truck is at pre-covid numbers but rail is still at seven days or three times more than it should be."

When asked his thoughts on the threat of a nationwide rail strike that the interviewer acknowledged would shut down the American economy, Seroka replied, "two-thirds of cargo leaves California by rail. So this is absolutely imperative that we get the rail agreement done. I know both sides are talking at the table still at this moment."

The "we" that Seroka speaks for is the ruling class and their fear and recognition of the enormous power held by rail, dock and other logistic workers.

Seroka's open recognition of the immense power of the railroaders underscores how such a strike would quickly destabilize port traffic, undermine the entire conspiracy between the PMA, Biden and the ILWU, and quickly galvanize dockworkers to join such strikes.

Seroka then went on to explain why backlogs have decreased in West Coast ports but have increased in East Coast ports. He indicated part of this decrease was related to earlier supply chain congestion, but acknowledged that the threat of a dockworkers strike was also responsible for the shift in the cargo distribution that has taken place.

Though this measure was taken in "anticipating what could happen," if a strike occurred, Seroka emphasized how "both sides (the PMA and ILWU) put out two media releases jointly signed saying they would not lock out nor strike on the West Coast ports."

Knowing that he has both the PMA and the ILWU

bureaucracy on board, Seroka added, "I do not think there will be disruption at all but we have to get a contract done and give confidence to the market and bring this cargo back."

Seroka's "confidence" is belied by the shipping companies increased fear that the PMA and the ILWU will be unable to contain the growing frustration and justified anger of West Coast dockworkers.

In September, the Port of Los Angeles handled 21.5 percent fewer containers compared to last year. These reductions in cargo volume are occurring at major ports along the coast and are resulting in the loss of jobs and the cutting of hours, particularly for the lowest paid casual workers who struggle even when fully employed.

Carver, a San Diego dockworker, has experienced the impact of this steep reduction of incoming cargo. He explained that because there is much less work at virtually all of the ports, particularly Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, "Travelers" were coming down to San Diego to find work.

"The Port of Los Angeles has slowed down tremendously so they are coming down here to take casual jobs, mostly 'B men.' Not only do they not get work that day, many are living in their cars awaiting work, and it just means you are further from reaching 'B man' category, as it is all a numbers game in addition to waiting for spots to open up."

Carver explained that in recent weeks he has only been able to log 16 hours of work a week. Between the lack of hours and high gas prices, Carver often makes the difficult choice to live in his car a few days, rather than make a trip to his home that is nearly 90 miles away.

The issues facing West Coast dockworkers—stagnant wages, decreasing benefits, threats to job security through automation, and deadly working conditions—are the same ones facing dockworkers globally. In the past few months dockworkers in Germany, South Africa, England, Canada, and Australia have engaged in strikes over these same issues.

To carry forward this global struggle, 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.

Such committees must be democratically controlled by the rank and file in order to unleash the enormous power of the working class.



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