

Dockworkers strike at the Port of Mobile after federal mediation collapses

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Port of Mobile workers, make your voice heard! Tell us why you're striking by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All comments will be kept anonymous.

Eight hundred International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1410 members began a strike Tuesday against the CSA Equipment Company at the Port of Mobile in Alabama. Workers were originally set to strike on October 21 until the union agreed to federal mediation less than 24 hours before the October 20 deadline. But those talks were later canceled, and the membership voted to strike at a "special meeting" held on November 18.

Mobile workers have been working without a contract since October 2018, and have already previously rejected three tentative agreements agreed to by the union, October 2020, the second April 2021 and this past September.

Since the last contract expired in 2018, the membership's benefits and pension fund has been frozen by the company. Workers are demanding a retroactive payout of benefits and pensions, in addition to control over the tying up of vessels contracted to CSA and more workers assigned per unit.

The strike at the Port of Mobile takes place within the context of a widening movement of workers around the world, particularly in the freight and transportation sector. International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) members in Vancouver, British Columbia went on strike in September; and 240 ILWU members at the Port of Oakland walked off the job at the beginning of the month, shutting down three major terminals at the port.

Hundreds of dockworkers at the Mersey Docks and Harbour company (MDHC) in Liverpool, England ended a two-week strike on November 4, their third since September. As a part of a one-day general strike in both Belgium and Greece this month, workers in the former country's three main ports struck "en masse" and paralyzed shipping, while in the later "all categories of ships" were tied up as the dockworkers around the country struck.

More than 120,000 US railroaders at the seven largest Class I freight carriers—five of which have terminals at the Port of Mobile—are pushing to strike next month after conductors rejected a White House-brokered tentative agreement. The results of that vote were announced the day before Mobile

dockworkers went on strike.

Also striking are 50,000 academic workers in California and New York City, who are demanding wage increases to cover their cost of living.

CSA has only agreed to retroactive payments to the union's Money Purchase Plan from October 2020 onwards. According to Local 1410 President Mark Bass, these payments would be in place of a wage increase, in spite of the fact that consumer prices have been rising at a pace not seen since the early 1980s.

The importance of the Port of Mobile

In spite of the courage and determination which workers have shown, the ILA has maintained radio silence about the strike, posting no public information about it out of fear of alerting the wider working class, especially the railroaders. Adding insult to injury, Bass announced that Local 1410 would only strike CSA's break-bulk operations, leaving its container operations intact, as well as those of APM Terminals, another company at the port where the local has members.

The isolation of the strike by the union leadership is undoubtedly bound up with their determination to protect the rapidly increasing economic and strategic significance of the Port of Mobile. The local, state, and federal government are all jointly overseeing the expansion of Mobile's facilities as part of a longer-term push to to distribute shipping traffic away from a relatively small number of ports which constitute choke points in the US and world economy.

At the end of last month, the Alabama Port Authority released the results of its 2021 Economic Impact Study. Since the last time the study was conducted in 2019, it showed that the port directly or indirectly accounts for one in seven, or 312,896 jobs throughout the entire state, compared to 161,130 jobs in 2019. Out of that figure are 262,196 "related user jobs," which are "concentrated with the state's auto manufacturing, retail distribution, and steel manufacturing, as well as paper/pulp manufacturing industries and chemical industries." Director and CEO of the Alabama Port Authority John C. Driscoll said

that jobs “generated by port activity ... have just about doubled [from 2019 to 2021].”

Birmingham Business Journal wrote that as the “the fastest-growing container terminal in the U.S. over the last five years, with 54.9% volume growth since 2017,” the port’s economic output amounted to \$85 billion in 2021, more than three times the amount in 2019 (\$26.8 billion). Writing on the study, AL.com noted that “State and local taxes supported by activity at the marine terminals totaled \$2 billion,” compared with \$614 million in 2019.

Alabama Political Reporter wrote: “Compared to the most recent study covering the calendar year 2019, these results show remarkable growth, including a 217 percent increase in overall economic impact, a 94 percent increase in jobs, and a 225 percent increase in tax revenues to the State and local governments.”

This growth has provided the impetus for several multi-million dollar expansion projects both at the port itself and throughout the state. The US Army Corps of Engineers has been overseeing the deepening and widening of the port’s channels, aiming to make it “the deepest container terminal in the Gulf of Mexico.” Class I railroad carriers Norfolk Southern and CSX are involved in projects expanding their freight lines via the port throughout the Birmingham and Montgomery area, respectively.

APM Terminals, which began container operations at the port in 2008, is “the fastest growing container terminal in the country over the past five years, with 54.9% growth in volume since 2017,” wrote AL.com. This is one of the reasons that have influenced shippers to circumvent the massive but clogged west coast ports and reroute their operations to east coast and Gulf coast ports, such as in Boston and in Mobile.

The role of the ILA

All the above data influenced Driscoll’s response that it’s “clear that the Port of Mobile is a tremendous asset to the State of Alabama. ... We believe that the Port of Mobile is the most dynamic, compelling port in America, and as we look ahead to an expanded container terminal, a deeper and wider ship channel, intermodal rail, and inland ports, these numbers will only grow.”

The key to this growth, however, lies in the ensuring of a maximum of “labor peace” by the union bureaucracy, which is doing everything in its power to suppress the opposition within the rank-and-file membership.

In addition to its attempt to prevent a strike at Mobile through federal mediation, the ILA bureaucracy demonstrated its value to the operators through its maintenance of operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. At a dinner earlier this

month “attended by almost a thousand shipping executives, maritime employers, longshore labor, port authorities and military,” ILA President Harold J. Daggett (whose 2021 “salary” was \$710,000) patronized dockworkers as “America’s Front-Line Heroes” whom he “likened working through the COVID danger to fighting in a war as an American soldier.”

Daggett said, “Allow me a moment to ask you to remember 35 active ILA members who we lost to COVID. This pandemic was a war we all fought, and 35 of my ILA members made the ultimate sacrifice.” He forgot to add, “the ultimate sacrifice” for profits. According to Mark Bass, at least four members in Mobile have died of COVID.

Yet, in spite of a “triple-demic” of COVID, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) raging throughout the country, Daggett used the opportunity at the dinner to demand further exploitation of the membership, saying “Automation—That’s a code word for unemployment. The ILA has pledged to USMX [United States Maritime Alliance] that we will outproduce any automated equipment.” In other words, the response of the ILA to automation is to force the membership to work even harder.

Local 1410 members must break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and establish a rank-and-file strike committee, one that will enforce democratic control of their struggle, if their struggle against the company is not to be isolated and betrayed.

The latest Department of Labor filings show that the ILA has \$82 million in assets, which is composed of the members’ dues money and is more than enough 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.

More importantly, ILA members must tear down the artificial wall imposed by the union bureaucracy separating them from their fellow class brothers and sisters in other sectors of industry.

Their allies are the railroaders, the locked out WestRock paper mill workers in Cottonton, the Warrior Met miners in northern Alabama, as well as the auto and auto parts workers, educators, and health care workers throughout the state, country, and entire world. Only a joint struggle—a class struggle—with these workers against their respective companies and union bureaucracy can ensure a victory at the Port of Mobile.



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