

Amid collapsing trade volumes, 238 business groups ask Biden to intervene in contract talks for West Coast dockworkers

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Are you a dockworker? We want to hear from you—fill out the form at the bottom of this article to tell us what you think about working conditions and the contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On March 24, 238 business groups sent a letter to President Biden urging him to intervene in the ongoing contract negotiations between the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). A particular concern of the signatories is the uncertainty surrounding a possible strike or lockout which would wreak havoc on profits across the entire economy.

For over 10 months, some 22,000 dockworkers at 29 West Coast ports have been without a contract. Despite the contract expiring last July, the ILWU has yet to even hold a single strike authorization vote.

In anticipation of the possibility that a strike may take place anyway in spite of the ILWU bureaucracy's best efforts, major companies have begun shifting cargo deliveries to other ports on the East Coast in an attempt to avoid repercussions from a potential strike or lockout.

"As we have witnessed, significant cargo flows have shifted away from the West Coast ports because of the uncertainty related to the labor negotiations," the letter stated. "...many cargo interests have expressly stated that they shifted cargo as a result of the negotiations. *That cargo will not return to the West Coast until after a contract is final and approved by both parties.* [emphasis added] The longer there is no ratified contract only increases the probability that some portion of the freight will never return to the West Coast ports."

Amid growing anxiety among the financial elite, another important aspect of this letter must be stressed: The financial oligarchy's fear that control over this contract negotiation may spill out of the hands of the pro-corporate ILWU.

The letter makes this point very clear by reminding Biden, "While we appreciate that the parties agreed not to engage in

a strike or a lockout, we are aware of several instances of activities that have impacted terminal operations. We need the administration to ensure these activities do not continue or escalate."

This is a clear reference to recent brief work stoppages at individual West Coast ports, including last month when ILWU Local 13 members shut down the Port of Los Angeles for an hour by taking their lunch together at the same time, as well as the trucker protests and blockade of the ports last summer. The possibility of strike action has only increased given the restive situation in the working class as a whole, as well as major contract fights later this year at UPS and the US automakers.

Agriculture Transportation Coalition (AGTC) Executive Director Peter Friedmann commented on these trends by explaining that, "Currently, too many West Coast marine terminals are operating on reduced schedules, some are open only four days a week," he said. "Terminals are closing because they lack sufficient volume of import containers to justify hiring the longshore labor to keep them open."

An ABC7 article reported that the Port of Los Angeles saw "43% less imports were processed at the Port of Los Angeles in February compared to the same time last year ... The only other time imports at the port have been this low was March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic."

A CNBC report of December last year showed the same trends. "Cargo volumes on the West Coast remained soft at the Port of Los Angeles in November, which saw a 21% decrease year over year in volumes. Overall, the port moved 7% less cargo in the first 11 months of 2022 compared to last year, which was an all-time record."

"Even registered members are having a hard time getting work"

The collapse in trade volumes has had a real impact on thousands of dockworkers who have not been able to find steady work, especially for casuals, or part-time workers who are guaranteed no benefits, hours or union representation.

Casuals are some of the lowest-paid workers in the industry, with licensed B-men and A-men having higher seniority and benefits despite all three tiers doing the same set of work under the same set of conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* was able to speak with Mack, a West Coast casual port worker, who described in more detail the crisis facing West Coast port workers.

“I’ve been a longshoreman for about two years now. I’m what they call a casual.”

“When I get work, I’m assigned to work at the port at Oakland, California. The hiring hall is in San Francisco, but we get dispatched to the Oakland harbor. You have to go to the hiring hall to get your ticket.”

Mack then explains in more detail the tiered system and how it works.

“The next steps up are Registered B man or Registered A man. B means you are limited registered, and A means you’re fully registered. There is a difference in pay and seniority.

“As to how long it would take to reach B level, it all depends on which port you got. It could take 20 years; it could take 30 years; it could take 15 years. It just all depends on what port that you got your lottery ticket out of. So there’s no set time frame.

“So for some guys, especially in the Long Beach/Los Angeles area, they’ve spent over 20 years as a casual. The average pay as a casual is usually \$31-33 per hour. You get the overtime rate on Saturday, which is around \$50 an hour, but it depends on what kind of work you’re doing. But it’s consistent throughout the 29 ports. So it goes by how many hours you have.

“When you’re a casual, you’re not allowed to work at different ports. You only work at the port assigned to you in the lottery.”

When asked if he would describe how the casual system works, he said, “The way they do the whole process is very archaic, very outdated. But that’s just the way it is. Sometimes you can get a lot of work, but right now it’s very slow. Even registered members are having a hard time getting out. So in order to make a living, they tell you when you come in not to quit your day job. So I do have a day job. Yes, you can’t survive off of getting a shift once every two or three weeks.”

When asked if the jobs he gets last several days, Mack said, “No, most of the time it’s for one day. You get a ticket, you go to work, then you go back, and then you go into the

rotation and wait for it to come around again. You wait for another ticket. And that could be three weeks later. It might be a week later. It depends on how much work they have for casuals.”

“The jobs that last two or three days, those are mainly for the A and B men. That’s not really for the casuals.”

Mack also expressed frustration over the hyper-exploitation that casuals face while working in the port industry. “I don’t pay union dues because I’m not part of the union. And that’s the issue there. They want you to do the extra work, but you’re not part of the union. You don’t have any union benefits as a casual.

“Any time you have casual workers that are getting max pay that are not registered, which happens a lot at the bigger ports, that’s ridiculous. It takes 4,000 hours to get max pay, but you’re still not a registered longshoreman. You’re still a casual. That should never happen.

“This is the way the company profits. They keep you at part-time status with no benefits, but you’re doing the work. So their profits are going up, and they are cutting their payroll by not making you permanent. You don’t have any medical benefits.

“I think the whole thing has to be changed. It’s wrong that if you’re able to go to work that you have to sit and wait and wait and take a third of your life or half of your life, sometimes 20 or more years, before you can get full-time pay and benefits. It’s not right.”

The fact that the ILWU has allowed this situation to happen by keeping workers on the job without a contract only exposes their role as agents of the ruling class, and that starving dockworkers of their jobs is just another strategy employed by the ILWU to ram through rotten agreements.

The letter to Biden must be taken as a warning that the government may be preparing to intervene to impose a contract. Last year, hundreds of business groups sent a series of letters to the Biden administration urging the president to intervene against a potential rail strike. In December, at the request of Biden, Congress passed a law banning strike action and imposing a deal which workers had rejected.

To fight against this conspiracy, dock workers need to form a Dockworkers Rank-and-File Committee that will wage a concerted effort against the entire ILWU apparatus.



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