

Southern California dockworkers, working without a contract, shut down ports for 24 hours

Dan Conway
9 April 2023

Are you a dockworker? Tell us what the situation is at your port by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The West Coast ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach reopened Friday evening after a 24-hour work stoppage shut down nearly all operations. Four of the six terminals at the Port of Long Beach were closed as a result of the stoppage, as were all seven containers at the Port of Los Angeles. Transnational shipping line A.P. Moeller-Maersk reported that on Thursday night every terminal in the harbor canceled vessel, yard, rail and gate operations.

More than 20,000 dockworkers on the West Coast have been working without a contract since last summer. They have been kept on the job by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which signed a “no stoppages” pledge with the port operators and has subjected workers to radio silence on the progress of talks.

A statement released Friday by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) industry group declared: “The largest ILWU local on the West Coast has taken action to withhold labor at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, resulting in widespread worker shortages.” While laying the blame for the stoppages on the ILWU union, the statement also notes, “The workers who did show up (for their assigned shifts during the stoppage) were released because there was not a full complement of ILWU members to operate the terminals.”

Limited operations are common during the Easter Holiday weekend, but not to the level of last week’s stoppage.

Responding to the PMA’s claims, ILWU local 13 released a statement which read: “Longshore workers at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach (Ports) are still hard at work and remain committed to moving the nation’s cargo.” The union claimed that the work

stoppage was simply the result of workers attending a monthly membership meeting Thursday night with other workers taking the opportunity to observe the Good Friday holiday on Friday.

Local 13’s Thursday night meeting saw outgoing local president Ramon Ponce de Leon swear in incoming President Gary Herrera. Although the union claimed that several thousand workers were in attendance, if such a meeting is held that would disrupt operations, sufficient advanced notice is normally provided to terminals.

Ian Weiland, chief operating officer at Junction Collaborative Transports, wrote in a LinkedIn post that terminals normally give truckers far more notice of closures in advance. On this occasion, truck drivers were only given a few hours’ notice.

Weiland noted that although the ports officially reopened on Friday evening, the disruption may in fact last longer. “If your container was scheduled to be pulled last night, today, or over the weekend,” he said, “expect delays in pulling the container. If your empty has not yet returned, expect delayed returns and unfortunately additional charges.” One other terminal, the Long Beach Container Terminal, reported that it would be closed on Easter Sunday as well.

Kip Louttit, executive director at the Marine Exchange of Southern California advised carriers to “determine if your ship has a reasonable expectation to go to a berth in the next three days.”

One dock worker who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* was confused as to how the stoppage started and why it ended so quickly. “The union said everything is working as normal today. I don’t know what the hell is going on.” The worker continued, “We’re in the dark for the most part. The world is erupting and we’re just existing. We’re all over it and just want to work under a

fair contract.”

Other workers who spoke to the WSWS gave indications that the work stoppage may have been in fact initiated by the rank and file itself. “Last night the strike began,” one worker noted in a Friday morning message. “Word is tonight same will happen. A-books are saying swing clerks and crane operators will not be showing up until the contract is signed.”

Whatever the circumstances behind the stoppages, they are a clear sign that the deal to keep workers on the job without a contract is being challenged by pent-up rank-and-file anger.

It follows similar unofficial stoppages in recent months, including last month when workers shut the Port of LA for one hour by taking their lunches together. In November, workers at the Port of Oakland shut down three terminals over payroll issues. Last summer, independent truckers also blockaded ports across the state to protest a new state law which threatened their independent status.

However, last week’s stoppage was the largest single action by workers to date.

Fearing a possible strike, and also to gain additional leverage against dockworkers, a significant portion of West Coast traffic has been diverted to East Coast ports. The port operators, for their part, are explicitly threatening to make such diversions permanent should a contract not be reached soon on their terms.

On March 24, an open letter was delivered to President Joe Biden by the National Retail Federation, the American Trucking Associations, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, urging the administration to help deliver and possibly even impose a contract on the dockworkers similar to how the administration shut down an earlier US rail strike on the rail carriers’ terms.

Even with the diversions of cargo to the US, the letter made clear the significant damage West Coast dockworkers could still do even with the most limited of job actions. “While we appreciate that the parties agreed not to engage in a strike or lockout,” it read, “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.”

The letter expresses fears that job actions may spread out of the control of the ILWU apparatus. Similar letters were sent to Biden by industry groups in relation to last year’s railroad contract, which was ultimately imposed by Congress after workers rejected a deal brokered by the Biden administration.

The temporary action by the workers also underscores the immense fragility of the US supply chain which the ruling elite is relying on for its war planning against Russia and China. The diversion of traffic to East Coast ports is likely not assuaging the worries of shipping companies as much as they had hoped for, because unrest continues to mount among dockworkers there as well.

The unrest at the docks is an international phenomenon. Last autumn, dockworkers struck in Liverpool in the United Kingdom while work stoppages are being planned at French ports as part of the ongoing struggles against pension cuts being imposed by President Emmanuel Macron without a vote in Parliament. The Fos-su-mer port will experience strikes for four-hour periods this coming week , with an all-day strike being called for Thursday April 13. Strike activity of the same duration is expected at the port of Le Havre as well.

The dockworkers, like their brothers and sisters in different sections of the working class throughout the world, hold immense power. However, they can only bring this power to bear by breaking the stranglehold of the trade unions, which are doing everything in their power to stop struggles from spreading and keeping ports operating for the benefit of the multi-billion-dollar shipping lines and for the financial elite as a whole.

Furthermore, the letter to Biden must be taken as a warning. The administration is certainly working behind the scenes to impose a contract should progress not be reached in negotiations.

Regardless, however, of whether a contract is imposed by the Biden administration or whether one is cobbled together at the last minute between the ILWU and PMA, dockworkers will not have their demands met for decent schedules, staffing and pay, unless they break from the corrupt union apparatus and take matters into their own hands. 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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