

Union for West Coast dockworkers in the US announces “tentative agreement,” but refuses to share details

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Dockworkers: tell us what you think about this “tentative agreement!” Fill out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Thursday, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) announced it had reached a “tentative agreement” on “certain key issues” with the Pacific Maritime Association on a contract covering 22,000 dockworkers on the West Coast of the United States.

For nearly a year, the ILWU has kept dockworkers on the job without a contract, the last one having expired on July 1. Now, they have agreed with the PMA to not tell workers what the terms of the tentative agreement are, or even what key issues are involved. “The parties have agreed not to discuss the terms of the agreement as negotiations continue,” an ILWU statement read.

This is a replay of a joint announcement last year, two days before the last contract expired. Then, the ILWU and PMA said that they had reached “a tentative agreement on terms for health benefits, subject to agreement on the other issues in the negotiations.” No further details on that have ever been released.

Both “agreements” are part of an ongoing campaign, involving the ILWU bureaucracy, the PMA and the Biden administration—which intervened in the talks well before the last contract expired and made clear it considers the operation of the ports a “national security” issue—to prevent a strike and ram through a sellout. Last summer, Biden made a warmongering speech from the deck of the World War II-era battleship USS Iowa in advance of the contract expiration. The clear implication was that, as was the case during World War II when the unions came together with the Roosevelt administration to ban strikes, “labor peace” was needed to prepare for the next World War—this time, against Russia and China.

This corporatist alliance includes a the ILWU, which has lent crucial assistance to the port operators and shipping companies, who have rerouted significant amounts of traffic to East Coast ports in preparation for a strike.

Biden’s intervention on the docks formed the model for his intervention later in the year on the railroads. Shortly before a mid-September strike deadline, the White House brokered talks with the carriers and rail union bureaucrats to reach a deal that it hoped would prevent a strike. When workers voted this deal down, Biden responded by getting Congress to ban a strike and impose the deal.

The announcement of the agreement last Thursday is clearly aimed at pre-empting the growing rank-and-file rebellion of dockworkers against the no-strike agreement reached behind their backs. A series of work stoppages over the course of this year at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach indicate that the ability of the union to contain the rank-and-file is breaking down.

Recently, longshore workers “red-tagged,” or flagged for maintenance, cranes and other port equipment in some container terminals, requiring their shutdown pending inspections, partially shutting down operations for eight to 12 hours. There were also significant shutdowns to operations at the ports over much of Easter weekend, which the ILWU ascribed to a local union meeting and the Easter holiday. These were preceded by a slowdown in March, when Local 13 members took their meal break all at the same time, shutting down operations during lunch hours.

Dockworkers who spoke with the WSWs expressed skepticism about the announced “deal.” One worker said: “They’re being tightlipped. Apparently they had a ‘tentative agreement’ [over health care] in 2022. I wouldn’t put much stock into it. I’m told prior to this

agreement the PMA had walked out on negotiations. What the significance of the Easter [stoppages] had, I couldn't tell you. They've been pretty tight lipped on these negotiations. Not even negotiating members' spouses are privy to info coming up out of these sit-downs."

A casual dockworker spoke about the abusive conditions at the port: "It's sad and a huge waste of time for casuals that go to the hiring hall every day for weeks to work one day, and it's misleading how they say that there's 500, 700, or even 900 jobs and then nothing comes to us. These misleading numbers are what make casuals come to the hall and hope for a job. ... There should be a class action lawsuit over this, because they make thousands waste their time and money to go see if there's any work. They should at least give us hours for showing up, because it's required to keep the job."

Whether the current contract actions are formally sanctioned by the ILWU or not, the initiative for the actions clearly come from the rank and file. The PMA, meanwhile, has issued statements condemning the ILWU for violating their no-strike agreement, and more than 200 business groups penned an open letter urging the Biden administration to directly intervene.

In other words, a similar situation is emerging on the docks to that which unfolded last fall on the railroads. There can be no doubt that the announcement of the so-called tentative agreement was the result of considerable pressure from the Biden administration to get a deal in place before things spiral out of control.

A strike on the West Coast docks would resonate powerfully in the working class throughout the country, and would potentially undermine similar corporatist arrangements with which Washington is trying to block strikes in other industries. Crucially, the job actions at the southern California ports come as contract talks start for 350,000 UPS workers, and five months out from the expiration of a contract for 150,000 autoworkers.

In the lead-up to the start of UPS talks, Teamsters president Sean O'Brien, who was in the White House contract talks on the railroads, was forced to make verbal concessions to rank-and-file anger, promising that the union will call a strike if no deal is in place by the time the current deal expires on July 31. However, since the start of talks, O'Brien and the Teamsters have abruptly dropped this rhetoric. O'Brien and top Teamsters officials are regularly meeting with the White House, and O'Brien absurdly tried to claim at a rally last week that the Biden administration did not intervene against railroad workers.

Meanwhile, The ILWU went out of its way to endorse Biden's pick for his new Labor Secretary, Julie Su, and praised outgoing secretary Marty Walsh. Walsh, a former union bureaucrat and mayor of Boston, was a key figure in both the Biden administration's intervention on the docks and the railroads.

ILWU president Willie Adams sent a letter to the Senate urging Su's prompt confirmation, declaring: "Marty Walsh comes from the labor movement and is a proud union member. He was unapologetic about supporting the working class while he served as Secretary of Labor. ... Julie Su is the right candidate to succeed Secretary Walsh and advance Pres. Biden's pro-worker agenda. She is experienced and dedicated to protecting workers. I urge the Senate quickly vote to confirm Julie Su as the next Secretary of Labor."

The time has come for dockworkers to take matters into their own hands. They have every right to demand to know: what is the deal which has been agreed to behind their backs? What are the "key issues" that have been "resolved?" What concessions has the ILWU given up?

At the same time, dockworkers cannot consider themselves bound to any "labor peace" agreement worked out between the PMA and the union bureaucracy, in talks which the rank and file were not a party to and were not consulted about. They have the right to take all action which they deem necessary to fight for their jobs, safety and standard of living. That requires, however, that dockworkers organize themselves independently in rank-and-file committees to be able to fight both management and the pro-corporate Biden administration and the corrupt ILWU bureaucracy.



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