

Southern California dockworker: “Every dockworker from Alaska to Miami should all be on the same page”

Marc Wells
16 May 2023

Dockworkers: tell us what you think about the situation on the West Coast! Fill out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Four weeks after the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) announced it has reached a “tentative agreement” on “certain key issues” with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) for a new contract covering 22,000 West Coast dockworkers, no details have yet been released to the rank-and-file. This complete behind-closed-doors secrecy is fueling anger and frustration among dock workers, who have been forced to work without a contract since July 2022.

An initial expression of this pent-up anger was a 24-hour work stoppage last month which shut down four of the six terminals at the Port of Long Beach and all seven containers at the Port of Los Angeles. Although the stoppage ended after 24 hours, both the ILWU and the PMA worry that the rank-and-file opposition of dockworkers is threatening the “no strike” agreement under which talks have taken place for ten months.

A strike on the West Coast docks would be extremely powerful. It would paralyze the entire logistic chain of the US economy and embolden workers in other key industries, including 340,000 UPS workers, whose contract expires July 31.

The ILWU has been working hand in glove with the PMA, producing carefully drafted joint statements illustrating the conspiracy between the union, the employers and the Biden administration to avoid a strike and force through a sellout. The experience of railroad workers is a warning to all dockworkers: last December, the Biden administration requested that

Democrats and Republicans in Congress block a railroad workers strike and ram through an agreement that workers had rejected.

On automation, one of the most burning issues, which could cost hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs, another secret agreement was reached on May 2 by ILWU Local 13 (Los Angeles) and the PMA, according to the *Journal of Commerce*. Once again, workers are being kept completely in the dark about the manning requirements for those non-automated terminals affected by the accord. Both ILWU and PMA have declined to comment.

The WSWs spoke to Andy, a casual worker in the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach, about these issues. His name has been changed to protect his identity.

Andy explained how work has drastically decreased since last year, as shipping companies have redirected traffic towards the East Coast. “Until last summer, you could have 19 shifts before a day off. Two years ago, it was crazy during the COVID backlog. There was more work basically than we could handle. But now, you know, because of the recession and all, and capitalism period, it’s collapsed, you know what I mean?”

He explained conditions for casuals, who are not union members and are forced to line up for hours a day for the chance to work. Casuals can go years before they are hired in as full-timers. “Especially for us on the bottom, work just got pulled out from underneath us. And if you have a family and children, it’s horrible. I’ve heard coworkers talk about skipping a meal because they have to feed kids. And others have tapped out their unemployment too. For some people, if they don’t have a job, it’s extremely dire.”

Casuals have no benefits. “We have none, we just have no health care and very minimal representation.” When accidents happen, “In some instances, especially when it’s slow like now, they [the union] will just throw you under the bus, you won’t even get the chance to go to Labor Relations Committee. You could be on non-dispatch for months.”

“There are people who work on the docks who are homeless. And it’s crazy to think that, because this is considered one of the top union jobs in the country. And we still have homeless people in our ranks. It’s amazing.”

However, lack of work is also severely impacting full-timers. “I have family members who have worked on the docks for decades. Recently they’ve been having to ‘check in’ at the hall. It used to be if you’re class A [the highest seniority category], you could get a shift and stay on that ship for however long the ship hangs around at your discretion, but now they don’t even let most of those guys do that. You just have to do your job and then go get another. Even if you’re at the top.”

On the question of automation, Andy recalled: “We need to maintain jurisdiction over automation and any part of our job that’s going to be computerized. I mean, there were people in 2002 during the pre-Iraq war lockout that were talking about automation. People have been aware of this. Institutionally, we’ve just been held back. The [union] bureaucrats are at the same golf games, same country club luncheons as the shipping CEOs.”

“The carriers got spooked by the contract [delay]. They got together and asked the Biden administration to intervene. Meanwhile, they diverted most of the cargo to ports in Texas, Alabama, terminals in Florida, New York and New Jersey. The Panama Canal was always strategically important to them for this reason.”

The leadership of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) has done nothing to support West Coast workers, Andy said. “Every dockworker from Alaska to Miami should all be on the same page.” The history of dockworkers is rich with examples of “the organized crime element in the ILA back in the days,” he remarked.

On the employers, Andy said, “The shipping companies are a real mafia. We made them a quarter of a trillion dollars in 18 months, straight into their pockets, new yachts, new summer homes in the

Hamptons.”

Andy compared the experience of dockworkers to the US railroaders. “We are equally as susceptible. They [ILWU, PMA, Biden administration] are having these backroom deals and they could easily try to do the same. But it was also promising to see the work stoppage a month ago. There will definitely be at the very least a push-back if they try to pull that off. A lot of people are restless, not just the bottom.”

Andy also expressed his support for and solidarity with the ongoing writers’ strike in the US, including thousands in Hollywood and southern California. “The money they make those studios is outrageous. I have no doubt they probably have just as many homeless people in their rank-and-file members as us dockworkers.”

He agreed with the need to unite workers from different industries into rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies. “That’s exactly what we need. Because these institutional bureaucratic unions are just throwing us under the bus in most, if not all, instances, you know? They’re just here to whip us into shape and make sure there’s no dissent, so to keep us all in line, we definitely need across all industries, because it can’t just be us dockworkers, us rail people. It has to be the people in the warehouses, the riders, people in supermarkets, across every sector.”

Andy spoke unequivocally about nationalism and the danger of world war: “You saw the speech Biden gave on that battleship USS Iowa in LA with warmongering towards China and Russia. I have family members who joined the Marines and I ****ing hate war. A war would impact everyone from every sector [of industry]. I don’t believe in capitalism at all, I’m anti-capitalist, I don’t believe in the neoliberal world order as it currently stands.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact