

# Major slowdowns on West Coast ports after dockworkers learn about insulting pay increase

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On June 2, ports up and down the West Coast experienced major slowdowns after furious dockworkers refused to show up to work this past Friday. The mass action was taken by workers after they learned the details of a proposed pay increase agreed to in secret by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), which represents major shipping companies, and International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which purports to represent some 22,000 longshore and warehouse workers. The two sides have been in negotiations since May 10, 2022.

In a statement issued by the PMA last Friday, delays and in some cases the complete closure of terminals were confirmed at the ports of Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland, Tacoma, Seattle and Hueneme.

Dockworkers in San Francisco and Los Angeles have confirmed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that workers took action after learning from the ILWU that the proposed wage increase in the tentative agreement, which has yet to be released, would only be \$1.56 across all three tiers: A, B and casual.

“The dispute is over wage increases,” a Los Angeles-area dockworker told WSW. “They want to give us a \$1.56 pay increase!”

Current hourly starting pay for casuals is \$32.31, which means a \$1.56 raise translates to a roughly 4.5 percent wage increase. This raise is, in reality, a wage cut, given that it is well below inflation, which in California is currently averaging at 7.4 percent.

While workers would struggle to get by on these wages if they were working 40 hours or more a week, the transfer

of cargo to East Coast and Southern ports over the last year has also left thousands of casuals without any consistent, much less full-time hours, forcing them in some cases to live in their cars while taking on second or third jobs.

For higher-tier dockworkers in Class A and Class B, the only ones who actually get to vote on the contract, \$1.56 “raise” equates to a roughly 3 percent increase or less of their hourly salary.

The meager wage proposal advanced by the ILWU and PMA in the still unreleased tentative agreement is a slap in the face to every dockworker who has labored throughout the pandemic, even as thousands of their co-workers were infected and at least 43 ILWU members succumbed to the virus.

The mass action by workers on Friday is a sign of the immense tensions that have built up on the docks as the ILWU, working in concert with the PMA and the Biden administration, has enforced a de facto no-strike pledge after the contract between the PMA and ILWU expired last year. Since the expiration, the PMA and ILWU have released multiple joint statements pledging “no strikes or lockouts,” assuring Wall Street and the major shipping companies that their profits will continue uninterrupted as workers’ wages stagnate in the face of once-in-a-generation inflation levels.

However, it appears this ongoing conspiracy between the PMA, ILWU and Biden administration is testing the patience of the dockworkers. This is the third time in the last three months that workers have effectively shut down port operations.

This past March, hundreds of members of Local 13 in Los Angeles all took their meal break at the same time, shutting down the port for several hours. The following month thousands of workers refused to show up to work, closing 11 of the 13 container terminals at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach for a day. At the time the ILWU released a statement saying it was in observance of “Good Friday,” a holiday that is not mentioned once in either the 2014-2019 agreement or the 2019-2022 agreement.

While several press outlets reported that the most recent stoppages were “wildcat strikes” that closed the ports, dockworkers in Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles confirmed to the WSWs that cargo was still being moved on Friday, and jobs were being handed out to workers at the hiring hall over the weekend.

A port worker in San Francisco told WSWs reporters that he was not aware of any coordinated action behind the Friday shutdowns. He surmised that skilled workers in the higher tiers did not show up to the hiring hall to express their discontent with the proposed \$1.56 “raise.”

A Los Angeles-area dockworker told the WSWs that while there was enormous anger over that “pitiful ‘increase’” and that “some terminals did turn people away [Friday night], my friend got a UTR (utility tractor rig) job at another terminal and worked the normal shift.”

He added that he heard from a dockworker who “was at the meeting” that “a lot of the rank and file are pissed.” While unconfirmed, he said there has been a “rumor going around that come Monday (June 5) the PMA plans on locking us out, same as 2002.”

If the PMA were to lock out workers, it would do so knowing that it has the support of the ILWU and the backing of the Biden administration, which—as railroad workers know from the imposition of the contract last year by Congress—is fully prepared to enact any dictatorial measure to ensure the continued flow of cargo and profits regardless of workers’ demands.

The insulting pay “raise” negotiated by the ILWU and the PMA demonstrates the burning necessity for dockworkers to organize outside of the ILWU bureaucracy in rank-and-file committees that are beholden to workers’ demands, not the corporations or the Biden administration. The

Democratic president will brook no disruptions on the ports that will threaten military deliveries to Ukraine and Taiwan in preparation for World War III.

The mood is shifting among dockworkers. “People want to know what the hell is going on,” a casual dockworker told the WSWs. “We work here, we want to know. We were taking care of business during COVID and now these executives are driving around in BMWs and Mercedes.”

The dockworker rejected the involvement of the Democratic Party in the so-called negotiations. “There is no actual political representation for the working class in this country in any capacity, especially not the Democratic Party. Drones bombing children into oblivion, locking them up at the border.

“They called us ‘heroes on the docks’ and talked about the ‘heroes’ at the grocery store. Well, I had a friend get COVID, and he was on a ventilator for three months. Thank god he’s still around, but the fact is every one of us on every tier, from Class A to casual took it from COVID.

“Now we have this ‘debt ceiling’ deal, which will cut everyone except the military. You think Ronald Reagan was bad, I think Joe Biden’s on track to put him to shame.”

He concluded, “Until capitalism is gone, automation will still be a threat. I still have to worry about losing my job to a machine, even though the machine should be doing this dangerous job.”



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