

As slowdowns continue on West Coast docks, Chamber of Commerce calls on Biden to force through tentative agreement

Jacob Crosse
9 June 2023

On Friday, the US Chamber of Commerce issued an open letter to President Joe Biden imploring him to appoint a “mediator” and force through a tentative agreement between the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the over 22,000 dockworkers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

In the letter addressed to Biden and acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su, Suzanne P. Clark, the CEO and president of the Chamber, wrote that the group was “very concerned by the premeditated and disruptive service actions that are slowing operations at several major ports along the West Coast.”

Beginning last week, and continuing through this writing, dockworkers at several West Coast ports have refused to show up to work after it was revealed that the PMA was proposing an across-the-board \$1.56 “raise” for dockworkers, well below the rate of inflation. The fury of rank-and-file workers across all three tiers, A, B, and casual, prompted the ILWU, worried that workers would take matters into their own hands, to unofficially authorize job actions that led to the near-shutdown of major ports and terminals.

Dockworkers have been laboring on 29 ports, from Washington to California, without a contract since last July, while the PMA and ILWU have been negotiating in secret for 13 months. These secret negotiations, Andy, a Los Angeles-area dockworker told the WSWs, have left him and his coworkers “frustrated...we don’t know what is going on. We have no say in anything, it is outrageous.”

Commenting on the long hours that dockworkers put in during the pandemic, and the “thanks” they have received so far from the PMA, Andy said, “Me and a lot of other people got over 2,000 hours. We didn’t step out of line, we did everything they asked. The PMA are talking about

not giving us enough retroactive pay, that insulting \$1.56 pay increase.”

On Friday, June 9, the PMA issued another statement confirming that while job actions had lessened at the Ports of Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland, the “Ports of Seattle and Tacoma continue to suffer significant slowdowns as a result of targeted ILWU actions.”

The PMA asserted that the ILWU was refusing to dispatch lashers, leaving ships idle and resulting in “a backup of incoming vessels.”

Terrified at the prospect that these limited actions could spiral into a “serious work stoppage at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach” that “would be devastating to...businesses,” Chamber Commerce CEO Clark, on behalf of Wall Street, urged Biden “to appoint an independent mediator to help the parties reach a voluntary agreement.” Clarke wrote that this “step is necessary to avoid potentially billions of dollars in economic damage to the American economy.”

Raising the prospect of invoking the anti-union Taft-Hartley law against dockworkers, and possibly deploying soldiers in the case of a strike, Clarke added that Biden should “consider additional steps that may be necessary in the event of a widespread work stoppage.”

This is the third statement issued by a major big business lobby over the last week calling on Biden to intervene in the dockworker negotiations, on the side of capital. On Monday, representatives from the National Association of Manufacturers and the National Retail Federation also called on the White House to impose a contract on dockworkers.

While Biden himself has not directly commented, his actions last year show that the self-declared most “pro-union” president is more than willing to run roughshod over workers’ democratic rights in order to satiate Wall

Street's unquenchable hunger for profits. Furthermore, high-level officials, in his administration and outside of it, have made clear that the White House has been actively involved in the dockworker negotiations from the outset.

In an interview on CNBC on Thursday, Gene Seroka, the executive director at the Port of Los Angeles, confirmed that the same labor officials who blocked a railroad strike last year, and subsequently dictatorially forced through a rotten pro-company agreement rail workers had already rejected, were again intervening in the contract talks.

"Here's what's been happening," Seroka said. "Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su has been working with both sides, individually and collectively, trying to keep these talks moving." Su was the deputy labor secretary under Marty Walsh last year during the railroad betrayal.

"Julie and her staff have been working tirelessly, not putting out press releases or coming on TV. They are talking with both sides to keep this progress moving," Seroka continued, adding, "From the secretary of labor's seat, this continues to be a top priority."

While he claimed not to know the exact details, Seroka confirmed that the major conflicts in the contract remain pay and "robotics." Seroka noted that during the pandemic, "Dockworkers were out on the job six days a week." The ILWU has confirmed that at least 43 members died of COVID-19, no doubt a significant undercount.

While dockworkers were risking infection and death to move cargo, the companies have pulled in record profits. Shipping giant Maersk, one of several companies represented by the PMA, posted \$30.9 billion in profit in 2022. And while shipping rates have declined from their 2021 highs, last month Maersk still reported a first-quarter profit just under \$4 billion.

In interviews with WSWs reporters on Thursday, Los Angeles area dockworkers reflected on the precarious and dangerous character of their work, the hated tier system, which was negotiated in by former ILWU President Harry Bridges in the 1960 Mechanization and Modernization agreement, and the need for dockworkers to unite as a class against the major corporations.

A casual worker said that she has been "a casual for 19 years. I need four more years to make it to Class A. It's been a long, long time, and we don't have any rights. My brother is an A man, we were always taught in our family to get union jobs, but things are very tough these days. It's stressful. I had an accident last month because I had a seizure, which was caused because I was so angry with

my boss."

Commenting on the anti-Asian sentiment that has been whipped up by both big business parties as part of the war drive against China, the dockworker said she was "against all this anti-Asian violence and hate. They are trying to blame Asian people for all the problems, trying to pit worker against worker. We are all facing the same problems."

A longshoreman who has been a Class A man for 15 years noted that the ILWU along the West Coast had yet to conduct a strike authorization vote nearly a year after the contract expired. "The Canadian longshoremen are having strike authorization votes [Thursday] and Friday. That's important because the PMA was trying to use the Canadian access from their ports to railways to Chicago and back East to reroute shipping since West Coast longshore have been carrying out job actions here."

Commenting on the miserly \$1.56 raise, a pay cut in real terms, given that inflation in California is over 7 percent, he said, "For us here, I wasn't happy about that tiny raise the PMA is offering us."

In a message to other dockworkers, Andy warned about the ongoing conspiracy between Biden, the ILWU and the PMA. "They are all just oligarchs. Biden is doing the same thing Trump would do. The same thing George Bush would do."

"It really is an international struggle," he added, "That's why the internationalism is so important. I mean if me, and all the other dockworkers in the world, got together and decided we weren't going to move cargo until our demands were met? That would be amazing."

The fight to link up workers in a joint struggle against the major international carriers requires the development of rank-and-file committees, controlled by the workers and independent of the ILWU union bureaucracy.

Workers cannot let the initiative remain in the hands of the ruling class and its state! It is urgent that workers begin communicating among themselves and coordinating actions to counter the conspiracy between the companies and the Biden administration, assisted by the union apparatus.

For more information or assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



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