

# The global significance of the North American dockworkers' struggle

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13 June 2023

On Monday, 7,000 West Coast Canadian dockworkers voted by over 99 percent to authorize strike action against British Columbia port operators. This vote took place as rank-and-file slowdowns and protests spread throughout the US West Coast ports, where 22,000 dockworkers have been working for nearly a year without a contract.

This past weekend, the port of Seattle, Washington—one of the busiest ports on the Pacific Rim—was shut down as workers protested the Pacific Maritime Association's (PMA) proposal to raise wages by a measly \$1.56 an hour, far below inflation. Slowdowns at some of the world's largest ports, including Long Beach and Oakland, have also taken place, with freighters queued dozens of kilometers offshore, waiting for the chance to dock.

It is difficult to overstate the powerful position West Coast dockworkers occupy in the world capitalist economy. For nearly half a century, a substantial amount of world trade has passed through the ports they make run, especially since the development of transoceanic container shipping.

As of June 9, cargo worth \$5.2 billion was stranded off the coast of California, Oregon and Washington, and that is after just a few days with production only slowed, not stopped. One need only recall the colossal economic impact of one container ship, the *Ever Given*, blocking the Suez Canal in March 2021.

Nearly 40 percent of all US imports, from food, to computers, to industrial products, passes through the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach alone. According to a 2022 analysis by maritime economist John Martin, nearly \$2 trillion a year in economic activity is generated through the West Coast ports. This is nearly 9 percent of the US gross domestic product in 2021.

The struggle raises a fundamental strategic issue that

all dockworkers must understand: If the companies succeed in following their decades-old playbook of dividing workers based on country, they will succeed in extracting greater concessions and reaping greater profits. But if the rank-and-file take action to unite across national boundaries, they can launch a counteroffensive against the operators and galvanize support among workers everywhere.

The world's ports are seething with working class anger over operator profits, COVID deaths and wages that fall further and further behind the rising cost of living. According to Crisis24, a maritime security consultancy agency, there were at least 38 major protests or strikes at ports around the world last year, nearly four times as many as in 2021.

Powerful dockworker strikes have taken place in recent months in England, France, Argentina, South Africa, Chile, South Korea, Germany and elsewhere over the same issues at stake on the West Coast of North America. Dockworkers on the west coast of Mexico have threatened strikes this spring, including in the city of Manzanillo, in the state of Colima.

In a statement reported by *Bloomberg* earlier this year, Crisis24 warned, "Labor unrest is unlikely to decrease going into 2023, and may in fact worsen in the likely event that global economic conditions do not improve."

The struggle pits workers in a fight against the Biden administration and both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as the Trudeau government in Canada.

In the last two weeks, letters have been sent from the National Association of Manufacturers (June 7), the National Retail Federation (June 5) and the Retail Industry Leaders Association (June 2) all urging the Biden administration, on behalf of Wall Street, to intervene against the dockworkers and dictatorially

force through a contract, as Biden and Congress did last year against railroad workers after they rejected a company-friendly deal.

These plans are well afoot, as revealed in an article posted on Monday by the *Journal of Commerce*, which reported that acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, who served as former Labor Secretary Marty Walsh's deputy during the rail struggle, was meeting with PMA officials on Monday in order to "get negotiators from the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] to move closer to a level on proposed wages that puts [an] agreement within reach."

For the Biden administration and its allies in Canada, shutting down the struggle of dockworkers is seen as critical not only for boosting profits, but also for escalating their war drive against Russia and preparations for war against China. Unlimited sums have been allocated by the ruling class for war, and all of this is to be paid for by lowering wages and slashing social programs.

The docks, moreover, are critical for the transport of military equipment throughout the world. A 2022 report from the Army War College noted that the US "is dependent upon its seaports to project military power around the world."

The report continued: "In a major conflict, 90 percent of US military cargo would ship by sea. Today's military port infrastructure is concentrated in 22 strategic seaports. Seventeen of the strategic seaports are commercial ports where the Department of Defense (DoD) ships its equipment, in the event of military conflicts overseas, alongside civilian commercial shipments."

Within this context, the apparatuses of the ILWU and other dockworker unions are doing everything they can to avoid a strike. Unlike its Canadian branch, the ILWU in the US ports has not even called a strike authorization vote, even though the US contract expired in July 2022. Local ILWU officials such as Local 29 President Raymond Leyba are threatening to fire workers for even speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, so terrified are they of the growth of rank-and-file anger.

The slowdowns and protests at West Coast docks show that the ILWU's attempts to hold back the rank and file are wearing thin. This massive bureaucratic

apparatus, staffed with officials with no connection to the struggles of dockworkers, is a weight on the backs of rank-and-file workers everywhere. Its aim is to police the rank-and-file on behalf of the Biden administration and the state.

In his pamphlet *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, which Leon Trotsky was writing at the time of his assassination at the hands of the Stalinist GPU in August 1940, the Russian revolutionary wrote: "There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power."

In the over 80 years since Trotsky subjected the degeneration in the unions to Marxist analysis, the process has only accelerated, while the separation between the high-level bureaucrats and the capitalist state has dissolved.

Rank-and-file dockworkers must not lose the initiative by waiting on the ILWU apparatus to take action for them. That day will never come. Look at the fate of American railroad workers, who voted overwhelmingly to strike and who rejected the union bureaucracy's effort to force through a sellout contract, but whose struggle was effectively illegalized by the Democrats and Republicans in Congress through the invocation of the Railway Labor Act. No faith can be placed in the ILWU's friends in the White House.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is prepared to assist workers in taking power into their own hands. The IWA-RFC is a global network of democratically controlled workers' committees whose aim is to give power to the workers on the shop floor. Its aim is to help workers break the isolation imposed by the union bureaucracies and make common cause with their coworkers internationally. We urge all rank-and-file dockworkers to contact us today.



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