

7,200 British Columbia dockworkers vote to strike, as US workers disrupt West Coast ports

Dylan Lubao
13 June 2023

Some 7,200 dockworkers at ports in Vancouver, Prince Rupert, and other locations in British Columbia, Canada, voted this past weekend to authorize a strike against the Maritime Employers Association (MEA) starting as early as June 24. Members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the workers voted 99.25 percent in support of strike action.

The BC dockworkers' fellow ILWU members at America's West Coast ports are also without contracts. This places workers on both sides of the border in an immensely powerful position to fight for their demands. A joint struggle of Canadian and American West Coast longshore workers would quickly cripple economic activity in North America's twin imperialist powers and disrupt the transportation networks that are being used to provision the US/NATO war on Russia.

The two largest US ports—Los Angeles and Long Beach—are located in California. The Port of Vancouver is Canada's largest.

Annually, more than C\$300 billion worth of goods pass through Canada's West Coast ports. According to industry analysts, a BC longshore strike would have major implications for supply chains across Canada and the United States. About 15 percent of US inbound and outbound containers move through the Port of Vancouver.

These facts explain why the corporatist ILWU officials on both sides of the border, together with their allies in the Biden administration and the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, are maneuvering to prevent any shut down of the ports.

Although the ILWU is the legal bargaining agent for longshore workers in both Canada and the US, it is doing everything in its power to keep the two contract struggles hermetically-sealed on national lines. Similarly, the ILWU bureaucrats are silent on the threat of state intervention to criminalize worker job action.

If the 7,200 BC longshore workers are to prevail, they must break through the union bureaucracy's attempt to isolate their struggle, and fight to make it the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against capitalist austerity. This must include

a special appeal for joint action with their 22,000 US colleagues at the Port of Los Angeles and other American West Coast ports who have been forced to work without a contract since last July.

The major issues for workers in the contract negotiations with the BC-based MEA are higher pay amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades and job security as port operators move to implement greater automation. When the previous collective agreement expired in March, the ILWU Canada promptly requested federal government mediation. Those talks broke down last month, though neither side has provided any additional details.

The strike vote in Canada coincides with ongoing slowdowns led by rank-and-file dockworkers, at America's West Coast ports. The workers are outraged by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA)'s proposed US\$1.56 per hour wage increase, far below the rate of inflation, which hit 6.5 percent last year, and by the union's failure to call a strike vote, although the contract expired 11 months ago.

On Saturday, dockworkers at the Port of Seattle joined the rank-and-file protest, provoking an angry outcry from the PMA. While not organizing the worker slowdowns, the ILWU has sanctioned them begrudgingly, after the fact, but only so that they can better rein in the rank-and-file.

Already, there are furious calls from big business for the government to intervene. The US Chamber of Commerce has urged President Joe Biden to appoint a mediator to help cobble together a sellout agreement between the PMA and ILWU. It and other employer groups have indicated that should a quick resolution not be found, they expect the government to impose a settlement. In response, Washington has announced that acting Labor Secretary Julie Su is working to broker a deal.

A shutdown of the US dockworkers' struggle by the Biden administration, with the critical assistance of the ILWU bureaucracy, would be in keeping with a virtual ban on strikes in key sectors enforced in the US since the beginning of the war with Russia. Last year, the US Congress voted along bipartisan lines to impose a union-backed sellout agreement on over 100,000 railroad workers, who had voted in large majorities to

strike for higher wages, safer working conditions, and sick pay, but were prevented from doing so by the rail union bureaucracies.

The Trudeau government, which like Biden and his Democrats relies on a close partnership with the unions, has been no less ruthless in suppressing workers' rights. It criminalized a strike by Montreal port workers in 2021, and has repeatedly made veiled threats of emergency back-to-work legislation against railway workers. Last spring, it worked with the Public Service Alliance of Canada to strangle a strike by 120,000 federal government workers and impose sellout agreements containing significant real-terms pay cuts.

Having worked nonstop during the first three years of the pandemic and cynically been labelled "heroes" by the port bosses, dockworkers are now being told, despite the employers reaping huge profits, that there is no money to provide inflation-busting wage increases.

The worsening conditions that dockworkers labour under are virtually identical no matter the country or region. Wages that fail to keep up with the soaring cost of living, brutally long shifts, the casualization of work, and the threat of layoffs due to automation are the day-to-day experience of longshore workers across North America and internationally.

North American ports, and those on the West Coast in particular, have been a hotbed of workers' struggles over the past several years. In each instance, unions like the ILWU have kept workers in the dark about contract negotiations or the struggles of other groups of dockworkers. They have run roughshod over near-unanimous strike authorization votes. And when belated job action proved insufficient to contain seething anger among the workforce, the ILWU has swiftly shut strikes down in coordination with employers and the state.

The last contract for British Columbia dockworkers was a 2019 sellout orchestrated by ILWU Canada President Robert Ashton. Despite a 98 percent strike mandate, Ashton declared, "Our goal is to keep the ports open with minimal disruption to trade." Accordingly, the ILWU prevented its members from striking, telling them merely to observe an overtime ban.

This was followed by a major strike at the Port of Montreal in 2021, launched by 1,150 dockworkers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Despite strong public support for the workers and repeated strike mandates from the rank-and-file, the CUPE leadership strung the workers along for over a year on a series of toothless protests designed to sap their will to fight. Then they stood by and allowed the Trudeau government to legislate the longshore workers back to work and impose a concessions-laden agreement.

Since then, a number of other strikes and corporate victimizations have occurred at Canada's West Coast ports, including:

- The 2021 suspension of 94 dockworkers at the Prince Rupert port for honouring a picket line set up by anti-Israeli protesters.

- A strike last September of 200 ILWU dock and warehouse workers at Vancouver's Deltaport and Westshore Terminals, which specialize in coal shipments.

- A multi-week strike last summer of 165 tugboat captains and engineers at Seaspain in Vancouver for higher pay, which ignited a solidarity strike by 1,000 other dockworkers represented by the ILWU.

- The walkout this past spring of federal port inspectors and technicians employed at the Port of Vancouver's Grain Monitoring Program, as part of the strike by the 100,000 federal government workers for whom PSAC is the bargaining agent.

The high level of militancy among dockworkers in Canada and the US underscores that the 7,200 Canadian ILWU members could count on powerful support from workers on both sides of the border. An appeal to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers would also meet with strong sympathy. In three months, contracts will expire for over 150,000 Canadian and American Detroit Three autoworkers. In Quebec, more than 600,000 public sector workers are on a collision course with the right-wing CAQ provincial government, which like other governments across Canada is seeking to impose huge inflation-driven real wage cuts and slash public services.

But militancy alone is inadequate. Workers face a political struggle against the government and the capitalist state as a whole—the principal enforcer of big business' class war agenda of intensified worker-exploitation, privatization and imperialist aggression.

To mount a united, working-class industrial and political offensive against the port bosses and the governments that stand behind them, the longshore workers must take their struggle into their own hands. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the ILWU bureaucracy; repudiation of the unions' alliance with the Biden and the Democrats in the US and the NDP-supported Liberal government in Canada; and a joint mobilization of longshore workers in the US and Canada.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact