

Faced with rank-and-file rebellion, White House intervenes to push out tentative agreement for West Coast dockworkers

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The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) suddenly announced a tentative agreement (TA) Wednesday evening for 22,000 dockworkers on the US West Coast, almost a year after the last contract expired.

No details have been released on the agreement, but the announcement is clearly in response to the growing rank-and-file rebellion against the “no strike, no lockout” pledge under which the ILWU has kept workers on the job. Workers have launched a series of escalating job actions at facilities across the West Coast, causing significant disruption to operations and shipping backups for the first time in months.

Significantly, the TA was announced only days after Canadian ILWU members in British Columbia voted by over 99 percent to authorize strike action. In addition to casting light on the fact that the ILWU has refused to even carry out a strike vote in the US, this demonstrates the potential for a united international struggle of workers in the US and Canada. All parties to the talks, including the ILWU, the PMA and the Biden administration, are determined to prevent this at all costs.

The circumstances behind the TA, including the fact that both parties are refusing to release details or even to broadly characterize its contents, make clear that it is a sellout. The deal was struck to pull the rug out from under workers at precisely the point when their level of determination and unity, as well as their economic position, is at its highest. With the busy holiday season peak approaching, a strike on the docks could cost the operators and corporate America as a whole more than \$1 billion a day.

A week ago, Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka told a board meeting that 52 ships with a total cargo of 420,000 TEU—a measure based on standardized 20-foot shipping containers—were currently en route from Asia to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The no-strike pledge, about which no worker was consulted before it was agreed to last summer, was worked out in close consultation with the White House, which has been heavily involved in the talks from the beginning. Biden, who also worked with Congress to ban a rail strike last year, is determined to prevent strikes in key infrastructure such as the ports. The ports are not only critical nodal points in the economy on which trillions in profits rely, they are also significant money-makers in their own right. The shipping companies and the port operators have made \$500 billion in profits in the last two years alone.

Equally important for the ruling class in blocking a strike is the escalating US-NATO war against Russia and the plans for war against China, as the ports are critical in the transport of military equipment. Meanwhile, the shipping companies and port operators have used the time provided for them by the ILWU to redirect shipping from the West Coast to the Gulf of Mexico and the East Coast, leading to a sharp fall in shipping volumes in the West. This is aimed at preparing to break any strike that does occur.

Biden’s key prop on the docks, as at the railroads, the auto industry, UPS, oil refineries and other key industries, has been the union bureaucracy, which is circling the wagons with the corporations and the government against a threat of rebellion from below. The hatred felt by workers toward the union apparatus

has only grown as a result of this, and in recent weeks the “no strike” pledge has begun to crumble due to stoppages conducted on the initiative of the rank and file. This has provoked a furious and terrified response from the bureaucracy, which is lashing out. ILWU Local 29 President Ray Leyba threatened retaliation this week against workers who spoke with WSWs reporters, in particular singling out low-paid casual workers, who have no contractual rights.

The refusal of the ILWU to release any details of the agreement is in keeping with the radio silence which has surrounded the talks from the start. Workers have been told nothing outside of occasional updates announcing “tentative agreements” on certain issues, without giving any information about what was agreed to. Prior to Wednesday’s announcement, the ILWU and PMA had declared a “cooling-off period” in a bid to get things back under control.

According to both press reports and statements from the ILWU and PMA, a key role in the talks was played by acting Labor Secretary Julie Su. Su was Biden’s pick to replace former Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, who resigned earlier this year.

Su’s confirmation as Walsh’s permanent replacement has been held up by right-wing Democrats, but she has received the endorsement of hundreds of trade groups as well as leading union officials, including ILWU President Willie Adams. Bernie Sanders, the self-described “democratic socialist” senator from Vermont, claimed that Su is a “champion of labor.”

In fact, Su was Walsh’s deputy as he was intervening to prevent a strike on the railroads, and she earlier served as California labor secretary under multimillionaire governor Gavin Newsom. All of those praising Su now were either directly involved in or bear responsibility for blocking strikes and imposing sub-inflation wage increases. Sanders himself played a key role in the maneuvering to push the rail strike ban through Congress last year, along with Democratic Socialists of America members in the House who voted in favor of the ban.

The script from the railroad struggle is being repeated to the letter on the docks. First, the union bureaucracy keeps workers on the job well after the last contract expired, even though management is demanding significant concessions. When opposition from below

finally threatens to boil over, worried business groups issue public letters demanding direct White House intervention to prevent a strike. Then, the government directly intervenes to hash out a deal behind the backs of workers, preferring to block a strike by having the union ram through a sellout. If that fails, Biden is fully prepared to once again use legal action to ban a strike. In the case of the docks, the “legal” authority to do so would come from the Taft-Hartley Act rather than the Railway Labor Act.

But the fact that this agreement has been announced is a sign of weakness and fear, not strength. Indeed, the self-congratulatory official press release from Biden, thanking Su and the negotiators for the “hard work and perseverance of the leadership” mirrors similar statements made in September after the White House-brokered deal was announced on the railroads. But within weeks, attempts to ram through the contract in a vote collapsed due to extensive and well organized opposition from rank-and-file railroaders.

Dockworkers must begin now to put themselves in the strongest possible position for a showdown with the PMA, the ILWU and the White House by forming a network of rank-and-file committees linking up every terminal on the West Coast, including in Canada. These committees, which also played a major role on the railroads last year, would serve to pierce the information blackout and provide workers a democratic forum to discuss their strategy independently of the management stoolpigeons in the ILWU bureaucracy, provide the organizational structure for joint actions, and make an appeal for the broadest possible support from workers in other industries and around the world.



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