

The economic, political and military logic behind the sellout contract for West Coast dockworkers

Ike Sasson
22 June 2023

For nearly a year since the last one expired on July 1, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has kept its 22,000 members at West Coast ports on the job without a contract.

The ILWU has not only kept workers on the job through a “no strike, no lockout” deal signed behind workers’ backs, it has kept them completely in the dark on the progress of the talks with port operators. Outside of short statements every few months announcing “tentative agreements” over this or that issue, workers have received no substantive information whatsoever on what has been agreed to over the past year.

But on June 14, the ILWU and Pacific Maritime Association suddenly announced a tentative agreement. This reportedly came after the parties, under the intervention of the Biden administration’s acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, self-imposed a 72-hour deadline to reach a deal. ILWU President Willie Adams personally thanked Su for helping negotiations to “cross the finish line.”

The reason for this sudden burst of activity is not hard to find. In the first instance, it is because workers themselves are increasingly ignoring the “no strike” pledge, which the ILWU signed without even consulting a single rank-and-file dockworker. Workers, apparently on their initiative, have carried out a series of job actions and work slowdowns which have significantly disrupted port operations across the region over the past several weeks.

The TA was also announced only days after 7,200 Canadian dockworkers in British Columbia, who are also ILWU members, voted by over 99 percent to strike. By reaching an agreement in the US, the ILWU leadership is blocking a united international struggle. The June 24 deadline after which Canadian dockworkers can legally strike was also, for the ILWU bureaucracy, the PMA and the White House, the deadline to get a TA announced in the United States.

But having announced the deal, the ILWU is now

returning to its normal “radio silence.” Adams told rank-and-file workers they would not see the full contract until after delegates of the longshore caucus review it next month.

As a matter of fact, a deal may not even exist. A similar trick was carried out last September on the railroads, when the Biden administration brokered a “deal” only hours before a September 15 strike deadline. As with the ILWU, the railroad union bureaucracy then delayed for months to try and allow opposition from the rank and file to dissipate and buy time for the government to intervene if needed.

What is known about the contents of the TA has sparked outrage from dockworkers. “The [highest-seniority] A-men are unhappy because they raised the retirement,” one worker said. “The wages,” which will increase at little more than 5 percent a year for six years, “are also a big sticking point ... There are only about 22,000 longshoremen. A raise wouldn’t cost them that much.”

Much more is at stake than maintaining the huge profits of the port operators and the shipping companies, however. The parties to this anti-worker conspiracy are determined to prevent the emergence of a working class movement in the United States and know that a strike on the West Coast could open the floodgates.

There are other signs, beyond the work slowdowns on the docks, that their ability to prevent this is breaking down. As they were wrapping up their “tentative agreement” on the West Coast, 340,000 UPS workers were voting to authorize strike action against the logistics giant, a vote which passed by 97 percent. Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien, in a bid to placate the rank and file which is hostile to the bureaucracy, has pledged to call a strike if no contract is reached by July 31—while desperately trying to get a deal in place before then.

A potential national of strike of workers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis is also possible this September. A growing rebellion among United Auto Workers (UAW) members has continued to find expression this year in the

40-day strike of Clarios workers near Toledo, Ohio, who rejected two sellout agreements before the UAW finally forced through a TA on the third try.

Other major struggles include the Writers Guild of America strike and contracts for tens of thousands of New York City transit workers and teachers.

To beat back this surge, the ruling class is resorting to government intervention. It has set up two lines of defense. First is the close and active involvement of the White House in all major national contract talks, to try and enforce a de facto ban on strikes and rein in wage growth through the medium of the union bureaucracy.

If workers overrun the first line, as they did when they voted down the rail contract last year, the second line of defense is direct state intervention. That was shown last year when Biden and Congress, with key roles played by the fake socialists in the corporate-controlled Democratic Party like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, banned a strike on the railroads and imposed the contract workers rejected.

The second line of defense is being bolstered by the ruling class. Earlier this month, the Supreme Court voted 8-1 that workers can be held financially responsible for losses incurred by an employer during a strike. This is a significant legal attack on the right to strike, which was supported by all of the Court's right-wing justices, as well as a majority of its so-called "liberal" wing.

They are now preparing to shore up their defenses on the docks. Two Republican Senators have introduced a bill which would ban slowdowns and stoppages at the ports as an "unfair labor practice" to be fined at double the economic damages incurred, or a maximum of roughly \$2 billion per day. The bill specifically bans "impediments" against port modernization, which has emerged as a major concern among dockworkers in the current contract. They are rightly concerned that new technologies would be used to carry out layoffs on the docks, as the companies have done for decades.

Another critical factor is the military significance of the ports. US imperialism is preparing for World War III against Russia and China and must get its "home front" under control, especially "critical infrastructure" like the docks.

The Department of Defense has identified 17 commercial ports that it considers "strategic seaports," out of which seven—San Diego, CA; Long Beach, CA; Hueneme, CA; Oakland, CA; Concord, CA; Tacoma, WA and Indian Island, WA—are located on the West Coast. Besides the deployment of military equipment, the ports would also play a key role in changes to supply chains to undercut China's role in electric vehicle production.

Prior to the contract expiration last summer, Biden made

an appearance at the Port of Los Angeles, where, speaking from the deck of the battleship USS *Iowa*, he attempted to scapegoat Russia for the economic hardship faced by American workers. Afterwards, the ILWU and PMA issued their no-strike pledge, while the ILWU also pledged not to handle Russian tankers docking on the West Coast.

The evident failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, spearheaded by thousands of soldiers armed and trained by the US and NATO, also forms the immediate backdrop to the contract. US imperialism is faced with the need to double down and send even more equipment and possibly even deploy US troops on a large scale to Ukraine. Last February, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg described NATO as being in a "race of logistics" in relationship to the war in Ukraine, meaning the timely movement of large amounts of weapons and equipment is a key factor in determining the outcome of the war.

The dockworkers' struggle is not an ordinary contract fight. Workers are in a political struggle against the entire corporate-controlled political system, of which the union bureaucracy is a part. In opposition to the conspiracy against them, workers must organize their own strength independently, with a clear understanding of who their friends and enemies are.

Last year, railroaders formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee in rebellion against the attempt to impose a contract from above. The Committee played a vital role in distributing information, discussing strategy and exposing the maneuvering of the bureaucracy and the White House.

Dockworkers must form a rank-and-file committee of their own. The fact that the entire government has been brought to bear against dockworkers is a sign that the ruling class will not tolerate opposition from workers. It is also a tacit admission of the immense power dockworkers have. The question is, however, that dockworkers know how to use that power.

The WSWs encourages dockworkers to contact us about building a rank-and-file committee and turning out to other sections of the working class as part of a united struggle. Contact us by filling out the form below:



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact