

West Coast dockworkers speak out against White House-backed tentative agreement

Joshua Rodriguez
23 June 2023

Are you a dockworker? Tell us what you think about the TA. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers are furious over the snap announcement this month of a tentative agreement between the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) for over 22,000 West Coast dockworkers. The deal was announced after the union bureaucracy had forced dockworkers to stay on the job for nearly a year on an expired contract.

The announcement that a tentative agreement had been reached followed months of slowdowns, initiated by rank-and-file workers, on the West Coast ports. Job actions by workers increased in frequency at the beginning of the month, after workers discovered that the PMA was originally proposing a meager \$1.62 wage increase.

At the same time workers in America were conducting job actions, over 7,000 dockworkers in Canada voted by a 99 percent margin to go on strike. Terrified of a united struggle with Canadian dockworkers, who are also ILWU members, Wall Street demanded that the Biden administration intervene and force through a contract.

The White House deployed acting Labor Secretary Julie Su following the strike authorization vote. Within three days of Su's arrival in San Francisco, an alleged tentative agreement had been reached between the PMA and ILWU. In statements announcing the agreement, both the ILWU and the PMA pointed to the leading role of Su in forcing through the agreement.

Su was the deputy labor secretary last year when the self-declared most "pro-union" president in history

dictatorially imposed a contract on railroad workers. In a repeat of that attack on workers' democratic rights, the Biden administration is likewise trying to impose a deal on dockworkers that falls well short of their demands.

Since the announcement of the agreement, both the PMA and the ILWU have gone silent, releasing few details to the membership, while demanding that workers get "focused" and back to work.

In a video released last Friday, ILWU President Willie Adams claimed that the tentative agreement will be reviewed by a caucus of 29 bureaucrats next month. These discussions will be kept secret from the rank and file. After this caucus comes to agreement, the TA will be brought to each local for some members to review. However, it is unclear, even among dockworkers, who actually will be allowed to see and vote on the contract at each local.

"I feel so outraged by the supposed tentative agreement," a Tacoma, Washington port worker wrote to the WSW. "The corporations see all the mega huge profits and give us a pay decrease essentially with the cost of living! What a joke the Biden administration has been for what was supposed to be help for us. They betrayed us."

Another Tacoma worker wrote: "I think this agreement is a joke and I will be voting NO!!! This is an insult to all of us who worked so hard while our brothers and sisters were dying through this pandemic just to fatten the pockets of these companies under the pretense of helping the American people and the United States economy. This is a spit in the face of all the union workers who have sacrificed so much."

Referring to a one-time 'hero bonus' included in the

deal, the dockworker said, “The \$70 million one time ‘hero bonus’ is coming from the federal government, not the shipping lines. Inflation is over 10 percent and the pay raises are only 5 percent. We are literally moving backwards. We will be more broke and even more reliant on these companies than before the contract. This is not a good deal. This is not what we deserve. When our total cost for our employer is less than 2 percent of their total operating cost, there is a problem.”

“Most members aren’t happy with the pension offer which is why it will mostly get voted down next month at the meeting,” another West Coast dock worker added. “Every local has different rules for the ratification process, in Los Angeles, I don’t even know if casuals can sit in or not.”

Daniel, a casual dock worker from northern California, told the WSWs that, depending on the local, many workers will not be able to attend union hall meetings where decisions regarding the July caucus will be discussed.

“They do this every negotiation,” Daniel stated. “The body doesn’t really know all the details. When they have a caucus, that’s when they’re going to pick the contract apart. If you’re not in the caucus, you won’t get to see what’s in the contract. Some places, only A-men [the highest seniority workers] get to talk. In our hall, the B-men can talk. In some halls, the casuals [the lowest tier, with no contractual rights] can’t even come to the meeting.”

“The A-men [most senior workers] are unhappy because they raised the retirement,” he added. “If you have 20 years, you multiply that by \$215 per year, and that’s about \$4,000 a month. They’re saying it should be at \$300 - \$350 a month per year worked.”

“They [management] don’t want to take on new employees because they don’t want to pay retirement, medical,” he continued, “but they made \$300 billion last year. It’s the same at UPS.

“Even though they say we have a TA, I don’t think that we have a TA,” he stressed. “I think that’s just something they said to get the media to back off. A lot of shippers say they won’t bring the cargo back until we have a signed agreement.”

“The problem is that the government shouldn’t even be involved. This lady [Su], she’s horrible. The retirement hasn’t been increased, the 401(k) hasn’t

even increased. Casuals haven’t been promoted, so what has she done? Absolutely nothing.

“If they sign that agreement, by the time 2028 gets here, we’ll be so far in the hole we’ll never pull ourselves back up,” he concluded. “We should be making \$60 an hour a year, and every year we should be getting a \$5 an hour increase, so \$90 at the end of the contract. Plumbers in the airport make \$100 an hour. There are only about 22,000 longshoremen. A raise wouldn’t cost them much.”

Workers around the world want to fight for what they deserve, whether it is Canadian dockworkers, or American UPS workers, both of whom voted overwhelmingly to strike in the last month. There is a deep seated hatred not only for the corporations who have reaped huge profits off of the blood and sweat of the workers, but against the trade union apparatus that has aided them in their attacks on workers.

West Coast dockworkers must learn from the experience of the Rail Workers Rank and File Committee, formed to oppose the union bureaucracy-company-government conspiracy to impose last year’s contract. They must organize independent rank-and-file committees to pierce the information blackout, organize democratic discussion outside of the purview of pro-corporate stool pigeons in the union bureaucracy and plan joint actions.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact