

Longshore union issues 72-hour strike notice after dragging out talks for 7,200 dockworkers in British Columbia

Niles Niemuth
27 June 2023

Update: On Wednesday morning the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada (ILWU) broke its two-week long silence on the state of negotiations and issued a 72-hour strike notice. Barring an eleventh-hour sellout, 7,200 British Columbia dockworkers will set up pickets at 8 a.m. Saturday. According to the ILWU's statement the main issues for workers in the contract talks remain the contracting out of work, the threat to jobs posed by automation, and combating inflation.

The BC longshore workers are in a powerful position—a strike will have an immediate and substantial impact on Canada's economy as well as US trade. But to meet the threat of federal government intervention, for which employers groups are already clamouring, the BC dockworkers must appeal to their fellow dockers and ILWU members at US West Coast ports, who have been working without a contract for over a year, and workers across Canada.

More than 7,200 dockworkers belonging to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada (ILWU) and employed by members of the BC Maritime Employers Association (MEA) at British Columbia's commercial ports have been in a position to launch a legal strike since June 24. However, the ILWU has refused to issue the requisite 72-hours strike notice mandated under Canadian law. Earlier this month, the workers voted by an overwhelming 99.25 percent to authorize strike action.

Despite the strike vote—which expresses the determination of port workers to fight for better wages, benefits and conditions—the ILWU has kept workers on the job, opting instead to continue talks with the MEA in mediation overseen by the Federal Mediation and

Conciliation Service. The previous contract, which was a sellout agreed to by ILWU Canada President Robert Ashton in 2019 after a brief lockout, expired at the end of March.

Talks between union bureaucrats, the MEA and federal government officials have been held behind closed doors, meaning that workers have been largely cut out of a process which will determine the next several years of their lives. In addition to wages, the issue of the implementation of automation and potential job cuts are significant questions in the contract talks.

The business press in Canada and the United States have worriedly noted that a strike by BC dockworkers could significantly disrupt the North American economy, meaning, in fact, that workers are in an extremely strong position to fight for their demands. The Port of Vancouver is Canada's largest port and the fourth largest on the continent by tonnes of cargo. It handles trade from and to more than 170 countries, and is a significant conduit for US imports and exports. Workers at the 29 terminals across Metro Vancouver which make up the port are responsible for handling one-third of Canada's overseas trade.

The west coast ports are critical for the operation of Canadian imperialism, including its role in the war against Russia in Ukraine and its support for the buildup of military forces in the Pacific to prepare for war with China.

Given dockworkers' strategic position in the Canadian and global economy, the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters trade association has appealed to the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government to push for a settlement and, if necessary, use legislation to illegalize a strike and impose a

settlement.

“Disruptions like these threaten our businesses, do damage to Canada’s global reputation as a trusted trade partner, further disrupt fragile supply chains, and cost jobs. That is why the federal government must do all that it can to avoid this strike, and to develop legislative solutions to prevent future disruptions to Canada’s fragile transportation network,” Dennis Darby, President and CEO of the CME said in a statement issued Friday.

What Darby, a former executive at manufacturer Procter and Gamble, and the CME are demanding is further restrictions on the rights of workers across Canada to strike and negotiate collectively. These rights have already been whittled away, with federal and provincial governments routinely adopting wage “restraint” legislation and illegalizing strikes, so as to force workers back on the job, and impose concessionary contracts through binding arbitration. In 2021, the union and NDP-supported Liberal government passed an emergency anti-strike law to criminalize a strike by more than 1,150 workers at the Port of Montreal.

The federal labor code also provides a vast array of legal obstacles to workers even obtaining the legal right to strike and imposes federal mediation, a process designed to suppress the class struggle and produce terms favorable to the corporations.

On top of this, workers face union bureaucracies which are completely subordinate to management and promote nationalism to divide workers in Canada from their brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world. The ILWU, which has 29,000 members in the US and Canada, has kept workers in British Columbia and across Canada in the dark about the struggle of 22,000 dockworkers along the US West Coast, who are confronting the same issues.

Wall Street has demanded that Democratic President Joe Biden intervene to block a strike, as he did with rail workers last year, and enforce a concessions contract. After workers found out that the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) was offering workers an insulting \$1.62 wage increase, they staged work slowdowns and walkouts from Los Angeles and other ports in southern California to Seattle earlier this month. Following the intervention of the White House, the ILWU suddenly announced on the evening of June 14 that it had reach a

tentative agreement with the PMA. However, the union is refusing to release any details and has indicated that it intends to drag out the ratification process over many weeks, even months, in the hopes of wearing down rank-and-file opposition.

Dockworkers in British Columbia are engaged in their contract struggle after four years which have seen disruptions to operations and supply-chains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and surging inflation. Last year, inflation in the province hit a 40-year high average of 6.9 percent, far outstripping meager worker wage increases and dramatically raising the cost of living. The cost of food, energy and housing has continued to surge across Canada in 2023, even as the Bank of Canada continues to raise interest rates.

While workers across Canada have been slaving away in the jaws of a pandemic which has killed more than 52,000 people, and their wages are being eaten up by inflation, the corporations have been posting record profits. According to Statistics Canada, total Canadian corporate profits before taxes in 2022 exceeded \$1.5 trillion, up from \$1.4 trillion in 2021. The BC MEA reported that its total revenue grew from \$304 million in 2021 to \$333 million 2022, and net assets grew from \$197 million to \$199 million.

BC port workers must follow the example of the workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario by forming a rank-and-file committee to break out of the straitjacket imposed on them by the unions and to fight for what workers need, not what the employers and union bureaucrats say is possible. Workers must demand that negotiations be held in the open with rank-and-file oversight and that any strike must not be isolated. They must fight for a united struggle with their brothers and sisters in the United States in order to beat back the corporate-government-union conspiracy which workers on both sides of the border confront.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact