

Federal and provincial government ministers threaten 7,400 west coast Canadian dockworkers following 72-hour strike notice

Roger Jordan
29 June 2023

Are you a dockworker in British Columbia? Get more information about building a rank-and-file committee by contacting the WSWs [here](#) or filling out the form at the end of this article.

Federal Liberal government ministers and the New Democratic Party Premier of British Columbia have issued veiled threats to criminalize a strike by 7,400 west coast Canadian dock workers scheduled to begin Saturday. The warnings came after the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) issued a 72-hour strike notice Wednesday morning, which will allow dock workers to walk off the job at 8 a.m. Saturday, July 1 if an agreement is not reached with the BC Maritime Employers Association (MEA).

The most direct threat as to how the capitalist state would respond to a dockworkers' strike was indicated by a joint statement by federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra. "Everyone—the employer, the union, the mediators, and the government—understands the urgency and what is at stake for Canadians and our supply chains. The parties are responsible for moving goods both nationally and internationally, and industries and consumers would feel the effects of a work stoppage," the two ministers declared. NDP Premier David Eby, speaking at a separate press conference, commented that he was "profoundly worried about the potential impact of a strike at our ports."

In other words, the impact of a strike on trade and supply chains would be so great that the government would rapidly intervene to ban the strike with back-to-work legislation. This was precisely how the trade union-backed Trudeau government responded to a strike by 3,000 dockworkers at the Port of Montreal in 2021. The business press has been loudly urging the Trudeau government to act similarly if a strike goes ahead in BC.

Eby's New Democrats are close allies of the Trudeau Liberal government. At the federal level, the New

Democrats are in a "confidence-and-supply" agreement to secure a parliamentary majority for the minority Liberal government through June 2025. The deal, which stopped just short of a government coalition, includes the NDP's full support for the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine and the enforcement of "post-pandemic" austerity on workers.

Canada's west coast ports play a central role in Ottawa's imperialist policies, including Canada's involvement in the war in Ukraine and the military build-up in the Asia-Pacific towards war with China. The Port of Vancouver alone processes goods worth approximately C\$500 million each day. About 15 percent of US inbound and outbound containers pass through Vancouver. If all west coast ports in Canada are included, more than C\$300 billion of goods are processed each year.

These figures underscore how dockworkers are in a tremendously powerful position to fight for their demands for an end to contracting out, job protection in the face of automation and wage increases to keep pace with inflation. A determined strike, which should be joined by the more than 20,000 US dockworkers who have been labouring without a contract for almost a year, would cripple North American supply chains at a time where the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government and Biden administration are doubling down on protectionist economic policies to facilitate the pursuit of aggressive imperialist war around the world.

However, workers will only be able to take advantage of their immensely powerful position if they take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. The ILWU bureaucracy saw the issuing of the strike notice not as a call to organize a genuine fight, but as a tool to reach a rotten agreement with the employers' association before the strike can begin. As ILWU president Robert Ashton, who agreed to a massive sellout contract four years ago after a short lockout, put it in a press release, "We remain committed to negotiate an end to this dispute that respects Longshore

Workers and we call on the BCMEA to drop all concessions and get serious about negotiating with the Union in good faith.”

Dockworkers in Canada have been labouring without a contract for close to three months since their old agreement expired on March 31. They were initially prevented from striking by reactionary “cooling off” requirements within the anti-worker “collective bargaining” regime. After the expiration of this enforced truce, the workers voted overwhelmingly by more than 99 percent earlier this month for strike action.

The ILWU bureaucracy responded by continuing closed-door talks with the employer, about which they provided the workers with no information. The ILWU arbitrarily and without explanation failed to issue a strike notice to allow workers to walk off the job at the earliest possible opportunity, which would have been June 24.

Making a mockery of the International in the union’s name, ILWU officials on both sides of the border have worked tirelessly to keep the dockworkers’ struggles hermetically sealed off along national lines. It is precisely because a joint work stoppage by dockworkers along the North American west coast would strike a huge blow against the ruling elite’s class war agenda and generate a wave of solidarity throughout the working class that the ILWU and its friends in the Canadian and US governments have done everything in their power to block job action.

In the United States, Wall Street demanded that the Biden administration intervene to impose a concessions-filled settlement, as it did on over 110,000 railroad workers last December. Under pressure from the White House, the ILWU announced a tentative agreement covering 22,000 dockworkers June 14 with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). But the union is dragging out the ratification process over many weeks and has provided virtually no information to workers about the agreement. Dockworkers south of the border are just as ready to fight as their Canadian colleagues, as shown by the work slowdowns enforced at ports along the US west coast earlier this month after workers found out that the PMA was offering a miserly \$1.62 extra per hour.

In Canada, the ILWU is a member of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), which provides decisive backing for the Trudeau Liberal government. The CLC has collaborated intimately with the Liberals since they came to power in 2015. This has included helping renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) along protectionist lines to prepare North America’s twin imperialist powers to wage war against Russia and China, and forcing workers back on the job as part of the ruling elite’s “profits before life” pandemic policy. The contempt for human life shown by the ruling class during the

pandemic had an especially devastating impact on dockworkers, who were compelled to continue working through lockdowns to keep “the economy” running, i.e., profits flowing to Bay Street and Wall Street.

Favourable conditions exist for dockworkers to mount a rebellion against the ILWU apparatus on both sides of the border, which is a necessary precondition for waging a genuine struggle for their demands. The impending strike by Canadian dockworkers is part of an upsurge of the class struggle that includes over 150,000 autoworkers across North America, whose contracts expire in less than three months.

Just hours after the ILWU issued its strike notice, 1,400 workers at the National Steel Car rail car manufacturing plant in Hamilton, Ontario, walked off the job after rejecting an insulting company contract. Workers at NSC recently formed the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee to seize control of their strike from the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy, which has refused to advance any strategy to defeat the company and win workers’ demands, including improved safety, inflation-busting pay increases and an end to two-tier wages and pensions.

To wage a successful strike, dockworkers on the west coast must follow the example of NSC workers and establish rank-and-file committees. These committees should draw up a list of demands based on what workers actually need, not what the highly profitable employers claim is “affordable.” Above all, these committees must fight to broaden the dockworkers’ strike into a political struggle for a mass worker-led counter-offensive against the ruling elite’s policies of imperialist war abroad and attacks on workers’ democratic and social rights at home. Fill out the form below for more information on how to build a rank-and-file committee on the docks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact