

7,400 Canadian west coast dock workers launch strike

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Are you a west coast dock worker currently on strike? We encourage you to contact the World Socialist Web Site to discuss the issues in your struggle and how to advance it through the building of rank-and-file strike committees. Fill out the form at the end of this article.

Some 7,400 dock workers at over 30 ports in British Columbia, including the Port of Vancouver, Canada's largest, launched a strike Saturday morning to fight for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, an end to contracting out, and job protection against the effects of automation. The strikers are in a powerful position to win their demands, since they play a critical role in the North American economy, helping move an estimated \$800 million in trade per day.

The striking longshore workers are taking a courageous stand. And not just against the shipping companies, who extract bumper profits from their ruthless exploitation in moving the billions of dollars in goods that pass through the ports each year—including all through the COVID-19 pandemic. The BC dock workers are also challenging the entire Canadian ruling establishment, including the trade union-backed Liberal government, which is under pressure from corporate Canada and the business press to criminalize the strike as soon as possible and impose a concessionary contract that ensures that BC's ports are "globally competitive."

Strikers must respond to these threats by broadening their struggle. First and foremost, they should make an urgent appeal to their American colleagues, who have been forced to labour without a contract for a year by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), to join them in a common struggle. Dock workers on both sides of the border are members of the same union and are facing the same attacks and threats of strikebreaking legislation. Yet the union the bureaucracy has kept workers divided, seeking to isolate their contract struggles along national lines.

Immediately after the ILWU issued the requisite 72-hour strike notice Wednesday, federal and provincial government ministers made scarcely veiled threats of back-to-work

legislation. Federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra called on workers to recognize the threat that a strike would represent to the "economy"—i.e., to business profits.

On Friday, O'Regan personally intervened in the talks between the ILWU and the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (MEA) in Vancouver. He has since vowed not to leave the city until a tentative deal is announced.

Undoubtedly, O'Regan, acting on behalf of the Trudeau government, has told the ILWU bureaucrats that if they don't soon come to terms with the MEA, a back-to-work law will be introduced in parliament.

With the Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Canadian Manufacturers Association and numerous other big business groups clamouring for government action, the MEA is, for its part, banking on the government's support.

The ILWU, however, is doing nothing to expose this anti-worker conspiracy.

In its statement issued as the strike began, the ILWU declared that it was "hopeful" that a settlement could be reached through "free collective bargaining" and affirmed it remains at the bargaining table. In other words, the union knows full well that workers are on a collision course with the federal government, and that the announcement of parliament's recall to illegalize the strike and impose a rigged, pro-employer arbitration process is at the very most only a few days away.

In 2021, the Liberal government, after issuing statements just like those it is now making about supporting "collective bargaining," rammed through legislation illegalizing a strike by 1,100 Montreal dock workers and imposing binding arbitration. The end result was a contract that imposed below-inflation pay increases and maintained the back-breaking scheduling and ruthless disciplinary regime against which the dock workers had waged a months-long struggle.

The ILWU's refusal to squarely address the threat of a government back-to-work law, let alone advance any

strategy to fight it, must be taken by workers as a stark warning. The ILWU, British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) and Canadian Labour Congress leaders are signaling to their partners in government that they will bow to such a law and enforce its provisions without a fight. To speak of a “free collective bargaining” process under these conditions is a fraud.

The aggressive intervention of the Trudeau government into the dispute underscores its role as a ruthless enforcer of the dictates of the financial oligarchy. Canada’s ruling class will tolerate nothing less than a rapid ending of the strike on the employers’ terms, not least because the west coast ports play a critical role in the North American economy. Under conditions in which the Trudeau government and Biden administration have strengthened protectionist economic policies to wage war on Russia and prepare for a conflict with China, the disruption of key supply chains by workers on strike is intolerable for the corporate elite.

The Liberal government enjoys the staunch support of the trade union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP has propped up the minority Trudeau government in parliament since 2019. In March 2022, just weeks after the outbreak of the NATO-instigated war with Russia, the NDP entered into a formal parliamentary-governmental alliance with the Liberals, pledging to keep the Trudeau government in power until June 2025.

The NDP Premier of British Columbia David Eby has joined in the vicious denunciations of the striking workers by big business. Declaring that he was “profoundly” worried about the consequences of the strike, Eby fully embraced the narrative that workers standing up for their just demands are to blame for the economic disruption rather than the unrestrained pursuit of profit by the employers. Federal NDP MP Alexandre Boulerice’s subsequent attempt to posture as an opponent of back-to-work legislation does not change the fact that the NDP is hostile to the striking workers. Aware that the Liberals could count on the support of the opposition Conservatives to back a strikebreaking law, some NDP MPs feel able to distance themselves from such overt displays of state-backed violence against working people.

It must be said bluntly that if the ILWU remains in control of the strike, the dock workers will be defeated. Throughout the entire bargaining process, the union bureaucracy’s goal has been to prevent a strike and a clash with the union-NDP backed Trudeau government. The ILWU has also worked tirelessly to keep dock workers in Canada hermetically sealed off from their American colleagues, even though the fundamental issues they confront are the same and they are members of the same union. O’Regan’s presence in Vancouver makes clear that the Liberal government and its union allies are already bringing immense pressure to bear

on the ILWU to wrap up the dispute as soon as possible so as to avoid the need for a back-to-work law.

The urgent task facing dock workers is to organize a rank-and-file rebellion against the ILWU bureaucracy, so as to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file strike committees should be established at every port. These committees should adopt non-negotiable demands based on what workers need for a decent standard of living, including an immediate 20 percent pay increase, an end to contracting out, and job guarantees for all.

The committees must also prepare to defy draconian back-to-work legislation, which has been enforced dozens of times by governments of all political stripes across the country in recent decades, by appealing for support from other workers.

Railworkers, Canada Post workers, Ontario education workers, Quebec public sector workers—indeed all workers in Canada—have a vital stake in defeating the systematic ruling class attack on workers’ right to strike and bargain collectively.

The most powerful immediate counter-blow that the BC dockers can strike is to unify their struggle with that of their class brothers and sisters at the US west coast ports. Following last month’s direct intervention of the Biden administration in the talks between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), the union announced it had reached a tentative contract for 22,000 US west coast dock workers. However, among the rank-and-file there is immense opposition to what is manifestly a sell-out agreement. The BC dockers should urge their US colleagues to repudiate this sellout—whose contents the union is keeping under wraps with the aim of wearing down opposition through a dragged-out ratification process—and join them in shutting down all West Coast ports until workers’ just demands are realized.



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