

Corporate Canada demands anti-strike law to criminalize west coast dock strike, as bosses break off talks

Penny Smith
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The British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) broke off contract talks Monday afternoon for 7,400 west coast Canadian dock workers, who have been on strike since Saturday. This highly provocative action is part of a concerted campaign by corporate Canada to use a federal Liberal government anti-strike law or the imminent threat of one to break the dock workers' militant strike.

"The BCMEA has gone as far as possible on core issues," declared the shipping companies. "Continuation of bargaining at this time is not going to produce a collective agreement."

The strike, which has hit 30 BC ports, including the Port of Vancouver, Canada's largest, is affecting more than C\$800 million of trade per day.

It is precisely because the striking workers are in a powerful position to win their just demands—which include inflation-busting pay increases, job protection against automation, and an end to contracting out—that the employers are railing against them.

BC ports are a critical pillar of the North American economy. Already, the impact is being felt in the North American auto sector, which relies on parts and materials shipped from Asia. "The [auto] industry is so tightly integrated between Canada, US, and Mexico," said Brian Kingston, president of the Vehicle Manufacturers' Association, "even delays at Canadian ports can have implications for the broader North American production ... The Port of Vancouver in particular is important."

Both the Trudeau Liberal government in Canada and the Biden administration in the US have placed increased stress on consolidating supply chains in North America and other economic protectionist measures so as to facilitate their war on Russia and preparations for military conflict with China. North America is viewed by the ruling elites on both sides of the border as a trade bloc providing the economic and logistical base from which to assert the global interests of the North American imperialist powers at the expense of their rivals.

The dock workers' strike represents a direct challenge to this agenda, which explains the immense pressure being brought to bear from corporate Canada to end it as soon as possible. On Saturday, the day the strike began, the Canadian Chamber of

Commerce—the country's largest business association—urged the federal government to "immediately recall Parliament to pass back-to-work legislation" in order to prevent further disruption to Canada's supply chains.

In its statement announcing the breaking off of talks, the BCMEA arrogantly declared, "ILWU Canada went on strike over demands that were and continue to be outside any reasonable framework for settlement."

The BCMEA denounced the ILWU for being "consistently unable to fulfill the trades work they have jurisdiction over." In other words, employers want the expansion of contracting out so they can massively attack the wages and conditions of dock workers. They also sought to incite popular animosity towards the strikers as spoiled and over-paid, asserting that the average wage of an ILWU dock worker is \$136,000 plus pensions and benefits.

ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton responded to the employers' aggression by admitting that the union had offered major concessions at the bargaining table and appealing for a resumption of talks. "When we finally had a document that was largely agreed upon as the result of continuous movement by the union on this one position the association decided to change their position in an attempt to muddy the water and mischaracterize the work, we have spent months discussing," said Ashton.

A day earlier, Ashton held a brief press conference, where he admitted somewhat grudgingly, that central to the employers' bargaining strategy is using the big business Liberal government and the repressive powers of the capitalist state to secure the "global competitiveness" of BC ports at workers' expense. "If the (BC Maritime Employers Association) gets their way, and their way is to let the government make this collective agreement for them, there will never be labour peace on the waterfront," the ILWU Canada president said. After noting that the union had previously not authorized a strike in 30 years, he went on to claim, "Labour peace in this industry comes from governments staying out of the business between a union and their employers."

This bluster is aimed at throwing sand in the eyes of dock

workers. Were Ashton really so concerned about government intervention, he would be seeking to rally the broadest working class support, not bleating appeals to Trudeau. He would be appealing to American West Coast dock workers represented by the very same ILWU to join and strengthen the struggle, and fighting to broaden the strike to other sections of workers across Canada confronting similarly miserable conditions, including the 1,400 National Steel Car workers currently on strike in Hamilton, Ontario.

But Ashton is a union bureaucrat, not a workers' leader. Behind his pose of opposition to government intervention, he and the ILWU are collaborating intimately with the Trudeau Liberal government and the BCMEA to reach a sellout deal. After meeting with both parties Friday, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan vowed he would not leave Vancouver until a deal was reached. On Monday, news broke that ILWU President William Adams was in Vancouver. There can be little doubt that behind the formal suspension of bargaining, backroom talks are ongoing between O'Regan, the employers, the ILWU and the leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) to strangle the strike.

Its name notwithstanding, there is nothing "international" about the ILWU's policies and strategy. The union bureaucracy has hermetically sealed off Canadian dock workers from their US colleagues, even though they are fighting for similar demands and are natural allies in the fight against the global shipping giants and North America's twin imperialist powers. Port workers along the US west coast have been working without a contract for almost a year. In June, as Canadian dock workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action, the Biden administration intervened to engineer a "tentative agreement" between the Pacific Maritime Association and the ILWU, which represents some 22,000 US dock workers. The ILWU is dragging out the ratification process for an agreement that it has thus far refused to even present to the workers.

If the ILWU in Canada has yet to reach its own tentative agreement, this is above all due to the bureaucracy's fear of the anger a sellout would generate among its members, whose landslide 99.24 percent vote in favour of a strike underscored their determination to fight.

A genuine struggle by dock workers must break out of the rigged collective bargaining process presided over by the corporatist union bureaucracy and their partners in the federal Liberal government. Despite its "progressive" rhetoric, the Liberal government has a long history of using anti-strike legislation to trample on workers' democratic rights and impose the dictates of big business. This was the case in 2021 with 1,100 dock workers in Montreal, whose strike was criminalized by back-to-work legislation that imposed binding arbitration. The result was a contract with below-inflation pay increases that maintained the back-breaking scheduling and ruthless disciplinary regime at the port.

The union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP) is also

playing a duplicitous role. It is feigning support, while working to sell out the BC dock workers' struggle. On July 1, the day the strike began, federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh briefly joined the striking longshore workers' picket line and delivered a short "solidarity" speech in which he vowed his party will oppose back-to-work legislation "every step of the way." While the ILWU has posted video of Singh's picket line appearance, it and indeed any mention of the BC dockers' struggle is conspicuously absent from the NDP leader's Twitter and Facebook accounts.

More importantly, Singh's militant posturing is belied by the NDP's hostility to the class struggle, support for war and austerity, and by its CLC-brokered governmental alliance with the minority Liberal government, under which it has pledged to keep Trudeau in office through June 2025. In recent weeks, Singh has repeatedly reiterated his and the NDP's continued support for their confidence-and-supply agreement with the government.

The fact is that the NDP and Liberals work arm in arm along with their partners in the trade union apparatus in a tripartite anti-worker alliance that enforces the ever more ruthless dictates of big business.

For the BC dockers to prevail in their struggle, workers must organize a rank-and-file rebellion against the ILWU and the entire political establishment, which is bitterly opposed to workers' elementary rights and demands. Rank-and-file committees must be established at every port to fight for workers' key demands and prepare to defy back-to-work legislation by broadening the struggle.

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.

An urgent appeal for support must also be made to US west coast longshore workers to join the strike. The unification of Canadian and American dock workers in struggle would cut across the threat of back-to-work legislation and set a powerful example for workers in other sectors. The development of a worker-led counter-offensive against the ruling elite's class war agenda of imperialist war abroad based on economic nationalism and attacks on workers' social and democratic rights at home is necessary to realize dock workers' demands for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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