

# As West Coast Canadian dockworkers near end of first week on strike, federal government steps up threats to criminalize job action

**Our reporters**  
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*Are you a striking dockworker in British Columbia? Contact us here or fill out the form at the end of this article to speak out anonymously about your working conditions and discuss the way forward for the strike.*

Around 7,400 dockworkers at 30 ports along Canada's British Columbia coast are approaching the end of their first week on strike for inflation-busting pay increases, an end to contracting out and job protection against automation. The strike is having a major impact on economic activity in Canada and the United States, producing intensified demands by the corporate elite for the federal Liberal government to intervene and criminalize the strike with a back-to-work law.

The British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), which represents 49 private shipping companies, is reportedly offering a 14.75 percent pay increase over four years, which would fall well short of inflation. The employers also hope to significantly expand the use of third-party contractors for maintenance work, opening the door for a further deterioration of wages and conditions for all workers.

On Thursday, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan made his most direct threat to date that government intervention is imminent. Speaking on CBC's Power and Politics, O'Regan declared, "It's reached a point where I need to make sure that Canadians understand that we know what is at stake. This is a third of the trade for the entire country. I've been talking to union heads and business leaders, ministers of jobs...they have imparted upon me what is at stake. It is a lot. It is the supply chains of this country." He then continued, "Get a deal. Canadians need a deal."

O'Regan also tweeted that he met with far-right Alberta

Premier Danielle Smith Thursday morning to discuss the urgency of a deal. Smith's United Conservative Party government has been among the most strident in calling for the strike to be banned. Alberta Transport Minister Devin Dreeshen cited the trade union-backed Liberal government's use of a back-to-work law to criminalize a strike by 1,100 Montreal dockworkers in May 2021. "They used parliament to resolve it," he said, before demanding the "same amount of urgency" to end the current strike.

The strike is impacting C\$800 million of goods each day. The Port of Vancouver alone accounts for around 15 percent of all inbound and outbound container traffic to the US. The BCMEA has made the absurd claim that a typical wage for a dockworker is \$136,000, ignoring the fact that many work part-time and that the cost of living in Vancouver is extremely high. As a dockworker explained in a Reddit discussion, earning upwards of \$120,000 annually requires that one work overtime and graveyard shifts. Taxes and housing eat up a large chunk of these earnings in a city where a one bedroom apartment costs an average of \$2,700 per month.

Big business and the media are smearing the strikers as overpaid to whip up popular animosity towards them. They also recognize the job action as a direct challenge to the ruling elite's "North America first" protectionist policies, which aim to transform the continent into an economic and logistical base for American and Canadian imperialism to wage war against their main rivals Russia and China. This policy depends upon the support of the trade union bureaucracy to ensure reliable supply chains by disciplining the workers to transport key raw materials and military equipment.

As the federal government moves ever closer to using the full force of the state to enforce the employers' demands, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) continues to disarm the striking workers. Although over 22,000 US dockworkers and members of the same ILWU have been working without a contract for almost a year, the ILWU leadership in Canada has made no call for them to join the struggle. Instead, it has worked tirelessly with the ILWU bureaucracy in the US to keep the struggles sealed off from each other along national lines, even though they are fighting for many of the same issues.

After the BCMEA announced the suspension of bargaining Monday, the ILWU responded with appeals to the bosses to return to the bargaining table, while at the same time offering workers no way forward in resisting an impending back-to-work law.

The ILWU doubled down on these positions at a rally Thursday morning at the Vancouver Despatch Hall near Vancouver's largest port operations, attended by approximately 200 workers and union officials. ILWU Canada president Rob Ashton delivered a brief address in which he declared that the union was ready to resume talks with the BCMEA and dismissed the threat of government intervention to shut down the strike and enforce a contract through binding arbitration. He did not present any proposal for collective action to force the employer's hand and defy government intervention.

"They want labor peace? Then get to the goddamn table," Ashton demanded of the BCMEA. "But they don't want to, they are trying to wait for the government to do their dirty work. They don't want to treat us with respect. The bargaining committee is here. The bargaining committee is ready. The bargaining committee is ready to rock and roll."

Ashton's position was laid out earlier in the day in a press release in which he underlined the union bureaucracy's prostration before the employers, despite their effort to tar workers and the ongoing campaign for government intervention. He said, "We're telling the BCMEA to call off their attack campaign, and come back to mediation. We're willing to look past the smears and insults if it means we can return to the place where respectful negotiations and an honest deal can happen: the bargaining table."

The ILWU has further hindered workers by issuing an unofficial injunction which blocks them from speaking out about the strike. Given that the union has control over the hiring halls and therefore a major influence over who

gets work, this injunction carries considerable weight in preventing workers from speaking openly about their conditions and demands, and what they think about the course of their strike.

However, on the picket lines across the Vancouver area dockworkers made clear in discussions with the WSWS their determination to fight for a wage increase which beats inflation and against the employers' push to eliminate jobs and lower worker standards through automation and contracting out work. Young workers described to the WSWS extremely difficult working conditions and low wages in which they may only receive 24 hours of work on the docks per month. Workers also noted expressions of solidarity from dockworkers in the United States and around the world which have made clear that the strike in British Columbia is part of an international struggle.

These healthy sentiments must be made politically conscious through the building of rank-and-file committees at every port. These committees are necessary for workers to seize control of the strike from the ILWU bureaucracy and place decision-making in the hands of the rank-and-file. Through such committees, strikers will be able to make a direct appeal for their US colleagues to join the struggle and draw other sections of workers across Canada into the strike.

The broadening of the strike internationally and its expansion to public sector workers, postal workers, rail workers, manufacturing workers, education staff, and others are the most effective ways to prepare defiance of back-to-work legislation. Workers across Canada all have a stake in resisting the decades-long onslaught on workers' wages and conditions, which has been enforced by governments of all political stripes with the backing of the trade union bureaucracy. Dockworkers can mobilize this powerful social force by consciously fighting for their strike to become the spearhead of a mass worker-led counteroffensive against the ruling elite's class war agenda of austerity and imperialist war.



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