

Trudeau government and Biden administration conspiring to shut down west coast Canadian dockworkers strike

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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.

The meeting Thursday between Canada's Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan and US Acting Secretary of Labour Julie Su must be taken as a warning by the more than 7,400 west coast Canadian dockworkers striking across 30 ports in British Columbia. It underscores that the Trudeau Liberal government in Ottawa and the Democratic Biden administration in Washington are conspiring behind the scenes to engineer the shutdown of the one-week-old strike, which represents a direct challenge to the Canadian and US ruling elites' policies of imperialist war abroad and attacks on workers' democratic and social rights at home.

Striking workers must respond immediately with preparations to defy government intervention, whether it takes the form of a rotten sellout agreement cooked up behind the scenes or back-to-work legislation and the imposition of binding arbitration.

This must include the construction of rank-and-file committees at every port to seize control of the struggle from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) bureaucracy, which continues to downplay the danger of government intervention and is pleading with the employers to return to the "bargaining table." The committees would make a special appeal to the 22,000 dockworkers in the United States, who were the victims of a similar White House-directed conspiracy last month to block a strike and impose a tentative agreement that has yet to be seen by any workers.

Following the Thursday afternoon call with Su, O'Regan, who has vowed not to leave Vancouver until a deal is reached between the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) and ILWU, issued a statement declaring, "Industry, labour, and all levels of government want to see goods moving through our BC ports."

According to media reports and statements from the parties involved, Su was a central figure in brokering the June agreement between the ILWU and the employers' Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). The sudden announcement came as dockworkers along the US west coast took increasingly militant job action in defiance of the "no strike, no lockout" deal between the ILWU and the PMA which has kept workers on the job for a year since their contract expired.

Su served as deputy to Labor Secretary Marty Walsh when the Biden administration intervened last November to block an impending strike by over 110,000 railroaders and ram through contracts that allows the highly profitable Class I railroads to continue ruthlessly exploiting the workers.

No details were provided on what O'Regan discussed with Su, but it is not hard to imagine what the content of their discussions were. The strike is affecting between C\$500 million and C\$800 million of goods per day. Canada sends approximately two-thirds of its foreign trade to the United States and approximately 15 percent of US container traffic passes through BC ports.

On the basis of these figures, Su would have told O'Regan that the continued disruption of supply chains is completely unacceptable under conditions of the Biden administration's escalation of the war on Russia, which demands the free movement of military equipment, and preparations for war with China. She would have explained that Wall Street is demanding that the strike be ended to avoid endangering North American supply chains and the economic protectionist policies upon which American and Canadian imperialism are basing their global plans to confront and defeat their great power rivals.

The Trudeau government is no less enthusiastic than the Biden administration to end the strike. In keeping with its long-standing close partnership with the unions, the Liberals preference is to apply pressure on the ILWU to reach a sellout agreement with the BCMEA and force it down

workers' throats. This explains O'Regan's involvement in talks for over a week, including at a last-ditch meeting involving both parties on June 30 aimed at averting the July 1 strike.

However, Trudeau's Liberals, who rely on the trade union-sponsored New Democrats in the House of Commons for a parliamentary majority, have proven in the past that they have no qualms about using the full force of the state to impose the demands of big business on workers.

In 2018, the Trudeau government criminalized rotating strikes by Canada Post workers fighting for wage improvements and job security. And in May 2021, the Trudeau government imposed a back-to-work law on 1,100 Montreal dockworkers, suppressing a months-long struggle against a brutal disciplinary regime, backbreaking schedules and real-terms pay reductions.

The next likely step will be for the government to announce the recall of parliament, which it will use as a threat to bully the ILWU into concluding an agreement. If a deal fails to materialize, the Liberals will seek to push through back-to-work legislation, which will receive enthusiastic support from the opposition Conservatives. New Democrat leader Jagmeet Singh, who claims to oppose strikebreaking laws, has at the same time renewed his commitment to his deal to prop up the Liberal government, which underscores the crucial role the NDP is playing in paving the way for the banning of the dockworkers strike.

The ILWU has nothing to offer workers in the face of the Trudeau government's open preparations to crush the strike at BC's ports. Earlier on the same day that O'Regan met with Su, ILWU Canada president Rob Ashton addressed a rally in Vancouver attended by several hundred workers and downplayed the danger of 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."

As Ashton knows full well, given that he has personally attended meetings with O'Regan and federal mediators, the government has already been actively intervening in the talks on a massive scale. Holding out the prospect of a "fair" agreement at the "bargaining table" under conditions in which Ottawa and Washington are conspiring to smash the strike is part of a conscious effort by the ILWU bureaucracy to deceive the workers about what they are up against and pave the way for the defeat of the strike.

The ILWU has also worked tirelessly to seal off striking Canadian dockworkers from their US counterparts, even as the Canadian and US governments collaborate intimately to

smother the strike. The ILWU in the US pledged Thursday not to handle cargo destined for Canada on ships being rerouted from Vancouver or Prince Rupert during the strike. But this announcement appears unlikely to have a major impact, since shipping companies can relabel containers with a new destination port while they are at sea.

The direct intervention of the Biden administration into the dockworkers' strike underscores that the strikers face a political struggle. In response to the attempt by the ruling elites in North America's twin imperialist powers to ban strikes in the transportation sector to strengthen supply chain security and other economic protectionist measures so as to pursue their predatory global ambitions, strikers must broaden their fight.

BC dockworkers must appeal to all sections of workers across Canada, who have themselves experienced decades of wage cuts, attacks on benefits and pensions and the undermining of job security, to join a worker-led counter-offensive against austerity and war. Public sector workers, health care workers, construction workers, manufacturing workers, postal workers, and others are natural allies of striking dockworkers, since they have all been the target of a ruthless clampdown on workers' rights by governments at all levels, including dozens of back-to-work laws over recent decades.

This political fight must not stop at the borders of Canada. The Biden administration's discussions with the Trudeau government on how best to end the strike have once again demonstrated that dockworkers in Canada and the United States are fighting for the same interests and face common enemies. They must unify their struggle internationally by breaking out of the nationalist, "collective bargaining" straitjacket imposed by the ILWU.



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