

Canada's New Democratic Party feigns “solidarity” with striking West Coast dockers

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With the strike by 7,400 dockworkers on Canada's West Coast now in its second week, big business and its most openly right-wing representatives, like the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments, are intensifying their calls for the federal Liberal government to criminalize the strike.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, meanwhile, continues to claim that his preference is for a “negotiated” settlement. But his actions and those of Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan indicate that if the government cannot soon prevail on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) bureaucrats to impose a sellout deal, they will recall parliament to legalize the strike and impose a pro-employer binding arbitration process.

On Thursday, O'Regan discussed how to end the strike—which has impacted billions of dollars in trade in both Canada and the US—with Julie Su, US President Joe Biden's acting Labour Secretary. Su played a major role in last December's criminalization of an impending strike by 100,000 US railway workers. On Friday, Trudeau claimed a “solution” to the strike could be found at the bargaining table, then added, “But I also know that pressure is mounting day by day and people are really, really worried what things could look like next week, and we are as well.”

The union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP) is playing an especially duplicitous role. Its principal concern is to assist the Canadian ruling class and its agents in the labour bureaucracy in containing and suppressing the dockers' strike, which they all recognize has the potential to trigger a shutdown of all North America's West Coast ports.

The NDP is feigning support for the strikers and opposition to any back-to-work law, while propping up the very Liberal government that is colluding with the Biden administration to suppress and, if necessary, criminalize it.

The federal NDP website has remained conspicuously silent on the dockworkers' strike. It failed even to report federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh's brief visit to a Vancouver picket line on July 1, the first day of the strike. While there, Singh delivered a short “solidarity” speech in which he vowed his party will oppose back-to-work

legislation “every step of the way.” During the video, which was quickly posted on the ILWU Canada Facebook page but only appeared on Singh's social media accounts five days later, Singh asserted, “The New Democratic Party is for negotiated contracts and the right of workers to strike. We call on the parties to settle the dispute at the table.”

These are farcical statements. The BC Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), the port employers' bargaining agent, has made clear that it has no intention of negotiating a “fair deal” with the dockworkers. When the BCMEA unilaterally withdrew from negotiations last Monday, the third day of the strike, it released an arrogant statement claiming, “The Association has gone as far as possible on core issues.” The statement demonized workers' demands as greedy by grossly exaggerating their current wage compensation, and demanded that the Trudeau government recall parliament to impose back-to-work legislation.

When talks resumed Saturday, the BCMEA proposed the use of an independent arbitrator to make “non-binding recommendations” on the outstanding issues, such as the outsourcing of maintenance.

Singh's claim to support workers' “right to strike” is belied by the fact that his party is in a parliamentary and governmental alliance with the Trudeau Liberal government. This big business government is waging imperialist war against Russia, implementing huge military spending hikes, and enforcing massive inflation-driven real wage cuts on workers, including through its staunch support for the Bank of Canada's high interest rate policy.

Moreover, the Trudeau government has repeatedly used back-to-work legislation or the threat of it to break strikes, including by Canada Post, transport and other logistics workers.

As for the NDP, its provincial governments have also routinely used strikebreaking legislation and imposed real-wage cutting “restraint” programs.

While Singh and the NDP long delayed posting anything about the dockworkers' strike, they were quick off the mark

when it came to celebrating former United Steelworkers (USW) International President Leo Gerard's appointment as a Companion of the Order of Canada, the highest level of that award. "A huge congratulations to Leo Gerard," gushed NDP leader Singh. "What an incredible accomplishment."

Gerard is a trusted ally of the corporate elite in Canada and the United States. Under his leadership, the USW enforced job cuts and attacks on wages and conditions on its hundreds of thousands of members across North America, and was one of the most strident supporters of the economic protectionist policies pursued by the Trump administration and Trudeau government to make the continent's twin imperialist powers ready for war with Russia and China. Gerard was well paid for his troubles, making \$217,206 a year as USW president, along with a lavish expense account and additional sums in other capacities.

The decision by Singh and the NDP to laud Gerard while maintaining a deafening silence on the dockworkers' strike speaks volumes about the character of this right-wing bourgeois party. Like social democratic parties the world over, the NDP has emerged over the past four decades as an unalloyed defender of the interests of big business. Like the trade unions that back it, the NDP has junked any tenuous association it had with the fight for workers' rights and socialism. It has imposed austerity policies when in power at the provincial level, while at the federal level supporting imperialist wars from Afghanistan to Libya and now against Russia in Ukraine.

Since 2019, the Liberals have relied on the NDP for their majority in parliament. It backed the Liberal government's pseudo-scientific "profits before life" response to the Covid-19 pandemic that has led to the deaths of 53,000 Canadians. In 2021, the NDP continued its support for the Liberal government as it rammed a back-to-work law through parliament to criminalize a strike by 1,100 dockworkers in Montreal, who had been working without a contract for three years.

In early 2022, the trade unions orchestrated a "confidence-and-supply" agreement between the Liberals and NDP that stopped just short of a government coalition. Under that agreement, the NDP has pledged to keep the Liberals in power until June 2025.

The Liberal-union-NDP tripartite alliance works both to suppress the class struggle and impose the "national interests" of big business—that endless sums of money be directed to NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine and into the bank accounts of the capitalist oligarchy through ramped up worker exploitation.

The ILWU's policies prior to and during the strike are in line with this agenda. First, it delayed the start of the strike as long as possible, including by bowing to reactionary

"collective bargaining" provisions that imposed a weeks-long "cooling off" period. Then, when the strike finally began, the ILWU leadership on both sides of the border worked tirelessly to keep Canadian and American dockworkers totally sealed off from each other, even though they are currently in contract disputes over many of the same issues. With the Trudeau government and Biden administration officials now discussing how to shut down the strike, the ILWU continues to plead for a deal to be bargained "freely" and downplays the imminent threat of government intervention. The ILWU has said not a word about how workers should respond to a back-to-work law, a clear sign that the ILWU intends to capitulate before one without a fight.

BC ports are a critical choke point in the North American economy, which is why the Liberal government, the unions, and NDP are so determined to keep the striking dockworkers isolated and impose a sellout at the first opportunity. If striking workers are to prevail, they must establish their political independence from the Liberal-trade union-NDP alliance. Rank-and-file committees must be formed by workers at each port, in coordination with their American counterparts, to seize control of the strike from the ILWU bureaucracy. The strike must be made the spearhead of a counter-offensive against the ruling class and its class war policies of imperialist war, attacks on workers' democratic and social rights and austerity.

The Trudeau and Biden governments are coordinating their efforts internationally to crush the strike. Workers must respond with their own international strategy to defeat these attacks and fight for demands based on what they need, not what the employers demand to maintain bumper profits.



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