

Dockworkers' union spouts “internationalist” rhetoric, while conniving to sell out strike at Canada's West Coast ports

Penny Smith
11 July 2023

*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. **Break the ILWU gag-order on workers speaking out** about their demands and working conditions and calling for unity with US dockers and other workers in a genuine fight to defeat the big business-government drive to break the strike. We are fighting for the development of rank and file committees to unite the struggles of dockworkers across North America and globally.*

The strike by 7,400 dockworkers at 30 British Columbia ports is now in its eleventh day.

The BC Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), which has been clamouring for the federal Liberal government to criminalize the strike from its outset, claims C\$7.5 billion in cargo destined to and from Canada and the US has been impacted, including automotive parts, refrigerated food, fertilizer, critical minerals and other goods.

The striking dockers are fighting for wage increases to keep pace with inflation, an end to contracting out and protection against job losses due to automation.

Objectively, their strike is a challenge not just to the port employers, who made bumper profits during the pandemic and want to impose further attacks on the workers. In disrupting critical North American supply chains, the strike is also cutting across the Canadian and US ruling elites' economic nationalist policies and imperialist wars.

Under pressure from the Trudeau Liberal government, the BCMEA and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) resumed talks Saturday. The BCMEA has reportedly tabled a new offer on contracting out. It included proposals for a joint union-management committee to explore “contracting in” and possible increased opportunities for the ILWU hiring hall to fill some port maintenance work, which is the main area where outside contractors have been used. However, the employers' offer contained no firm commitment to limit, let alone abolish, contracting out, a mechanism used to slash labour costs and gut workers' rights. The ILWU has thus far not publicly responded to this offer or otherwise commented on the talks.

If the negotiations fail to produce an outcome acceptable to big business soon, the Trudeau government will intervene with back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike. It has done so repeatedly in the past, including in 2021 when it illegalized a strike by Port of Montreal dockers after just five days.

Along with a veritable Who's Who of Canadian big business lobby groups, the Biden administration is pressing the Trudeau government behind the scenes to quickly reopen the ports. BC's ports are critical for the supply of military equipment for American and Canadian imperialism's aggressive operations around the world, including the US-NATO war on Russia, and the raw materials used in their manufacture.

Last Thursday, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan held closed-door talks with acting US Secretary of Labor Julie Su. Su engineered the conclusion of a “tentative agreement” last month between the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the ILWU for 22,000 US West Coast dockworkers. She also played an important role as assistant to then Labor Secretary Marty Walsh in blocking an impending strike by over 110,000 railroaders last December.

Underscoring just how extensive the Trudeau government's involvement in the talks is, O'Regan has vowed not to leave Vancouver until a deal is reached.

International solidarity and the ILWU's July 9 rally

At a rally attended by hundreds of workers in Vancouver on Sunday, the ILWU downplayed the imminent danger of government intervention to suppress the strike and, above all, issued no call to mobilize the working class across Canada and its US West Coast members against it.

Instead, ILWU officials directed their anger at third-party contractors and sought to convince the workers in attendance that they were conducting an international struggle. This included parading before them the ILWU International President Willie Adams—who has been leading the union's

attempts to block a strike by US West Coast dockers, who have been without a contract for over a year—and longshore union bureaucrats from Australia and other countries.

ILWU Canada Vice President Pat Bolen told the demonstrating workers that the collective agreement, which expired over three months ago, lays out “very clearly” that anything to do with the movement of cargo on the docks or ships is the jurisdiction of the union, which controls the hiring halls. He went on to demonize third-party contractors for having “no skin in the game” and “coming in and stealing our lunch.”

This is the voice of a cheap labour contractor outraged that he faces competition for his services, not a workers’ leader fighting in defence of working conditions. Workers are rightly concerned about the use of poorly trained third-party contractors, which reduces the amount of work available to union members, swells employers’ profits at workers’ expense and undermines safety protections. But for Bolen it is merely a matter of “stealing our lunch,” i.e., the flow of union dues money from highly exploited dockworkers into the pockets of ILWU bureaucrats. Moreover, ever keen to maintain corporatist relations with the employers, Bolen identifies the contractors as the problem, not the port bosses who consciously employ them to boost their already hefty corporate profits.

ILWU International President Adams asserted his support for the unity of North American dockworkers. He vowed that ILWU members in the US will not be unloading rerouted cargo, declaring, “They think they can take the ships to Tacoma, Seattle, Oakland, LA —ain’t happening, ain’t happening.”

The main problem with this statement is that it is “happening” and directly under the ILWU and Adams’ watch. According to maritime track company eeSea, four container vessels bound for Vancouver have changed their pro forma port rotations to call at Seattle first, before supposedly returning to Vancouver at a later date. Additionally, there are two confirmed omissions of Canadian ports by vessels that will now call only at the US West Coast: the *MSC Sara Elena* and *Ever Safety*.

The *MSC Sara Elena* was serviced in Seattle before announcing it would not be heading back to Vancouver, which means that the Canadian-bound freight was unloaded or will be unloaded in future at US ports where only ILWU workers are allowed to process vessels.

The ILWU is not explicitly sanctioning the scabbing operation. It has officially announced that containers bound for Canada will not be unloaded at US ports. But there is a massive loophole in this pledge. The restriction does not cover containers that had their destinations changed at sea, a practice which shippers and their clients are now rushing to accomplish. On security grounds, neither dockers nor the ILWU receive information about the contents of containers, meaning there is no way for workers to determine where a container was originally headed.

If Adams and the ILWU were remotely concerned with

international solidarity, they would not have connived with the Biden administration last month to announce a “tentative agreement” to prevent American and Canadian dockworkers from fighting together. This was the clear purpose of their sudden deal with the PMA, which followed hot on the heels of a more than 99 percent vote in favour of strike action by Canadian dockworkers. It was also unveiled as militant job actions by American dockworkers were growing in defiance of the “no strike, no lockout” agreement struck between the ILWU and US port employers to keep workers on the job without a contract—for what is now over a year.

A true internationalist policy for Canadian dockworkers, not just empty phrases, would involve an urgent appeal for US dockworkers to join the strike. Instead, the ILWU is maneuvering to keep workers hermetically sealed off from each other along national borders, while spouting “internationalist” rhetoric to appeal to the powerful sentiment for cross-border solidarity among rank-and-file dockworkers. While the ILWU exploits its control over the hiring halls and thus the ability of its members to get work to enforce a ruthless censorship regime on the picket lines, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters received strong support from dockworkers in off-the-record discussions last week about the need for an international struggle to achieve their demands.

To exploit their powerful economic position and win their strike, striking BC dockworkers must organize a rebellion against the ILWU bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees should be formed at each port, in coordination with their American counterparts, to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers and advance workers’ non-negotiable demands. An urgent task for these committees is to prepare to defy government back-to-work legislation. This is possible only by mobilizing support from workers across the transportation sector, postal workers, public sector workers, healthcare workers, manufacturing workers and others across Canada, all of whom have a stake in defeating the decades-long onslaught on workers’ rights and the criminalization of strikes.

The Trudeau and Biden governments are coordinating their efforts internationally to crush the strike. Workers must respond urgently with their own international strategy to oppose these attacks by developing a mass worker-led political counteroffensive to put an end to the ruling elite’s class war agenda of austerity and imperialist war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact