

ILWU endorses government-dictated contract, shuts down Canadian West Coast dockworkers' strike

Roger Jordan
13 July 2023

*Are you a dockworker in British Columbia? **Contact us here or fill out the form at the end of this article** to speak out anonymously on your working conditions and voice your views about how your struggle can be won. **Under conditions where the union bureaucracy has bowed to the big business Liberal government and ordered an end to the strike, it is more important than ever that workers break the ILWU gag order.***

Canada's trade union-backed Liberal government has succeeded in forcing an end to the 13-day West Coast dockworkers' strike with the connivance of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). On Thursday morning, the ILWU Canada leadership announced it had reached a tentative four-year agreement with the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) based on a proposed settlement drafted by a senior federal mediator and that workers were being ordered to return to work forthwith.

The union is now working with the employers to get the 7,400 dockworkers back on the job as soon as possible without their having been apprised of even the key details of the proposed agreement, let alone voting on it.

The union's shutting down of the dockworkers' strike is a gross betrayal. It is an abject surrender, not just to the shipping companies and terminal operators but to the Trudeau government. It imperils the rights of all workers, as the unions have once again made clear that they will bow to government strikebreaking legislation and even just the threat of it, without a fight.

On Tuesday evening, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan announced he was invoking Section 105 (2) of the anti-worker Canada Labour Code and instructing a federal mediator to draft a proposed settlement which the ILWU and BCMEA would then be given 24 hours to accept.

This ultimatum was a back-to-work law in all but name. Moreover, as the clock ran down on the 48 hours, government ministers, including Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, railed against the strike's "intolerable" economic impact.

The mediator took little more than half of the 24 allotted hours to draft his proposal, strongly suggesting that the legal mechanism used to impose the government-dictated settlement was discussed extensively in advance.

At 10:20 a.m. Pacific Time, with 10 minutes to spare before the

government's deadline, ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton issued a one-sentence press release announcing the end of the strike.

Underscoring the thoroughly anti-democratic character of the entire process, the parties agreed to keep the terms of the agreement secret. "(D)etails of the agreement will not be released at this time," declared the BCMEA in a celebratory statement. Throughout the talks, the BCMEA, which represents 49 private sector employers, including five giant corporations that made more than \$100 billion in profits last year alone, smeared the workers as "overpaid" and ridiculed their demands as unacceptable.

Notwithstanding the absence of any details on the agreement, it is beyond doubt that the ILWU has accepted a sellout that meets none of the workers' demands, including wage increases to keep up with inflation, an end to contracting out and real job protection from automation. The one piece of information made public about the tentative agreement, that it will have a term of four years, was one of the employers' main demands. Moreover, the BCMEA was clearly jubilant at the outcome, gushing in its statement, "We would like to express our appreciation to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service officers and the Minister of Labour, Seamus O'Regan Jr., for assisting both Parties throughout this process. Specifically, we would like to recognize the expertise and unwavering dedication of federal mediator Peter Simpson and his team, who were instrumental in achieving a tentative agreement."

In his own statement, O'Regan noted, "The BCMEA and ILWU have accepted the terms of settlement from federal mediators." That is to say, the union went along with the government-dictated contract lock, stock and barrel.

In announcing the government's intervention to break the strike, O'Regan explicitly justified it in the name of protecting the "national interest." He expanded on this point in a *Globe and Mail* interview Wednesday, stating, "I worry about the stability of our supply chain if this carries on." Cynically denying that the Trudeau government was "imposing" an agreement, O'Regan remarked, "I characterized it as a forceful nudge."

O'Regan's reference to the "national interest" means the interests of Canadian imperialism. As Ottawa and its US imperialist partner wage war against Russia and prepare for a military conflict with China, North America's twin imperialist powers must ruthlessly enforce a continent-wide regime of labour

peace to secure the supply chains and economic operations necessary to prevail in the inter-capitalist struggle for profits, markets, resources and geostrategic advantage.

The Trudeau government's partnership with the union bureaucracy—and its allies in the social democratic NDP—has been a central pillar of this policy of war, economic nationalism and enhanced “global competitiveness.” O'Regan explicitly acknowledged this in his order that led to the end of the strike. “The scale of this disruption shows how important the relationship between the BCMEA and the ILWU is to our national interest. We cannot allow this work stoppage to persist and risk further damage to the relationship between these parties,” he said Tuesday.

The “importance” of the corporatist “relationship” between the union bureaucracy, the bosses and the government for Canada's ruling elite has been shown time and again since the Trudeau government came to power in 2015. It has repeatedly employed the services of the union apparatus to suppress the class struggle, so as to avoid the need to use the naked force of the state and preserve, thereby, the fiction that Canada is a “democracy” in which the government and state apparatus serve the “people,” not the ruling capitalist oligarchy.

At the same time, the Trudeau government has shown no compunction at mobilizing the repressive power of the state to break strikes that the unions have proven incapable of ending. Back-to-work legislation was rammed through by the Trudeau government to criminalize rotating strikes by postal workers in 2018 and a strike by Montreal dockworkers in May 2021.

The Trudeau government's brazen trampling on the right of dockworkers to strike for their demands and freely bargain an agreement is of a piece with the ruthless abrogation of democratic rights by hated prowar, pro-austerity governments around the world. In France, the reviled President Macron deployed savage riot police against protesters in opposition to his gutting of pension rights to pay for huge military spending increases. In Britain, draconian anti-strike legislation that effectively criminalizes job actions in wide swaths of the economy has been enforced by the Tory government after the unions succeeded in strangling major strikes by healthcare, rail and postal workers. The Biden administration intervened to outlaw a strike by over 110,000 railroaders last December. All of these regimes cannot tolerate popular opposition that threatens to upend their savage pursuit of imperialist interests around the world by means of war against their strategic rivals abroad and against the working class at home.

The Trudeau government hopes that with the ILWU's capitulation Thursday to its dictated contract, the dockworkers' struggle, which by disrupting supply chains objectively cut across the ruling elite's waging of imperialist war around the world, is over. But they should not speak too soon. The 7,400 dockworkers must still vote on the tentative agreement, which the ILWU bureaucracy is sure to keep under wraps as long as possible prior to any vote. The ILWU is currently trying to ram through a similar phantom tentative agreement on 22,000 American dockworkers, having refused to make its terms public for almost a month after accepting a White House-brokered deal. The rejection of either or both of these contracts would rapidly lead to a new eruption of open struggle at the West Coast ports.

Canadian dockworkers must prepare to decisively vote down the government-dictated tentative agreement. But this necessary step must be coupled with a broadening of their struggle to make it the spearhead of a mass working class industrial and political offensive against the war, attacks on workers' social and democratic rights, and the boosting of corporate profits in the name of securing Canada's “global competitiveness.”

The 13-day strike has powerfully demonstrated that dockworkers confront a battle on two fronts: against the union/NDP-backed Liberal government, which enforces the demands of the corporate elite and stands ready to smash any resistance that obstructs the ruling class agenda of war and austerity; and against the union bureaucracy, which is an appendage of the government and corporations and serves their interests by suppressing the class struggle.

The ILWU worked throughout the strike to keep Canadian dockworkers sealed off from their American class brothers and sisters, even though dockers across North America are fighting for essentially the same demands. The ILWU bureaucracy also consistently downplayed the threat of government intervention and refused to advance any strategy for the striking dockers to make an appeal to workers across Canada to join them in defeating the ruling class' onslaught on workers' rights. Then, the moment the government gave its “forceful nudge,” the ILWU bowed to its dictates without so much as a peep.

A “no” vote will pose dockworkers with the urgent necessity of unifying their struggle with dockworkers in the United States and Mexico to oppose the ruthless pursuit of profits by the global shipping concerns. It will also demand the development of a joint struggle with workers across Canada to defeat all efforts by the federal government to intervene with the full force of the state to impose the bosses' demands with a strikebreaking law. To carry out this struggle, dockworkers must seize control of it from the nationalist and pro-corporate ILWU bureaucracy by building rank-and-file committees in every port. We encourage all dockworkers ready to fight on this basis to contact us to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact