

Growing opposition among Canadian West Coast dockworkers to ILWU's support for government-dictated contract

Penny Smith
16 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.

There is growing anger among the 7,400 Canadian West Coast dockworkers after the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) bowed to a government-dictated contract Thursday and shut down a powerful 13-day strike. Underscoring the anti-democratic and anti-worker character of the so-called collective bargaining process, both the ILWU and the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) are withholding the terms of the four-year agreement from the workers, who must still ratify it.

The ILWU bureaucracy's shutting down of the strike was a colossal betrayal. The dockers, who had voted more than 99 percent to strike, are fighting for pay increases that keep pace with inflation, job protection from automation, and an end to the outsourcing of port maintenance. The tentative agreement drafted by a senior official within the big business Liberal government and accepted wholesale by the ILWU leadership meets none of the workers' core demands. Otherwise, there would be no reason for the union to keep it under wraps.

Last Tuesday, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan invoked section 105 (2) of the anti-worker Canada Labour Code. It gives the government the means to seek to break a strike and impose a pro-employer contract without having to recall parliament and criminalize it through an emergency back-to-work law.

O'Regan gave a senior federal mediator 24 hours to draft a proposed agreement, followed by 24 hours for the ILWU and BCMEA to approve or reject it. With 10 minutes to spare on O'Regan's anti-worker ultimatum Thursday morning, the ILWU leadership announced its support for the government-dictated agreement and ordered an immediate end to the strike. In the hours that immediately followed, the union bureaucrats cooperated closely with the employers to get workers back on the job the very same day.

More than three days later, workers are still in the dark as to

what the ILWU top brass has agreed to and no date for a ratification vote has been set.

Throughout the strike, the ILWU imposed a ruthless regime of censorship on the picket lines. Exploiting their control over the allocation of work through the hiring hall system in place at British Columbia's 30 ports, the union leadership ordered workers not to speak to any media outlets. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters who spoke to strikers encountered workers who were eager to explain the conditions they face and voice their views about how their struggle could be won, but were unwilling to be quoted for fear of reprisals.

However, the level of outrage among the rank-and-file over the shutdown of the strike is so great that the ILWU's censorship regime is now breaking down. Several workers have taken to social media and written to the WSWs to express their opposition to the government-dictated, ILWU-endorsed contract. Many are urging their fellow workers to vote down the tentative agreement and return to the picket line.

One worker told the WSWs, "The BCMEA group continues to make billions while the hard workers get peanuts. [ILWU Canada President] Rob Ashton sold us out. I guess he will be looking for a management job somewhere, lost all respect."

A father with 7 years' experience on the docks in Prince Rupert in northern British Columbia described a string of injuries he has suffered on the job and the gruelling schedule workers must endure in their effort to make a living wage. "I have not been home for more than a 12-hour period. Shift work is sometimes days, evenings or even graveyard. Short shifts are a normal thing. From evenings to days then to graveyard—three shifts in a 27 hour period ... is that legal?" he wrote.

On the devastating toll draconian scheduling has on workers' mental health, he said, "In the last few years four guys were driven to suicide, probably from overworking. Heck I was going that way for a while."

Speaking of the threat of job displacement through the expansion of port automation, he noted that "to be honest, automation is upon us and the fall of global shipping on the west coast is too. Eventually we'll all lose our jobs without having a chance to get trained to run the automated industry."

These statements stand as a refutation of the slanderous claims made by the port bosses that workers' demands are

“unreasonable.” Throughout the strike, the BCMEA has smeared them as “greedy,” often repeating that the top-paid dockworkers’ salary is \$132,000 in order to incite public animosity towards them. The multi-billion-dollar shipping companies, which have made bumper profits since the COVID-19 pandemic, of course neglected to mention that only some 1 to 2 percent of dockers earn this wage, and only if they work all year round and perform graveyard and night shifts. The reality is that the bulk of longshore workers labor on a part-time or casual basis and must wait many years before possibly gaining a full-time position.

A report published earlier this month entitled, *Fighting For Stable and Fair Longshore Jobs: The Shocking Economic Facts Behind the BC Ports Labour Dispute*, revealed that the shipping giants are, in fact, gorging themselves on staggering profits. The report explained that 5 big global shipping companies in the BCMEA made more than C\$100 billion in profit just in 2022, up 1500 percent since 2019. Conversely, over the same period, dockworker wages in BC grew less than 10 percent—which translated into a real-terms pay cut.

Faced with seething anger among the rank-and-file, ILWU Local 500, which represents many of the dockers in the Greater Vancouver area, has felt obliged to come out against the tentative agreement. Shortly after they did so, the union’s Facebook page was disabled.

Workers’ opposition to Ashton and the ILWU top brass’s acceptance of the government-dictated agreement and short-circuiting of the strike has triggered vicious infighting within the union apparatus. Local 500 subsequently issued a statement on its website expressing disgust that a “fake” bargaining update had been issued in its name, touting the proposed contract. “Not only is it not from us, but it contains misleading information,” a Local 500 communiqué claims.

Although it is unclear at present who the authors of the fake letter may be, it is in keeping with the line peddled by the ILWU Canada leadership, including President Ashton, who refused to denounce the federal government’s intervention to break the strike.

The ILWU Local 500 leadership clearly fears that openly bowing to the Trudeau government’s dictates risks provoking a rebellion among the rank-and-file that it would struggle to control. But it is offering no strategy to mobilize the working class for the inevitable confrontation with the trade union and NDP-backed Liberal government that the necessary rejection of the sellout four-year agreement will entail.

This is underscored by its failure to make any criticisms of the ILWU Canada and ILWU International leaderships’ conduct of the strike. From the outset of the strike, the ILWU leaders, despite militant declamations about “international solidarity,” deliberately kept port workers in British Columbia hermetically sealed off from their class brothers and sisters at the US West Coast ports. Joint action was out of the question for the union bureaucracy, even though dockers on both sides of the border are in the same union, are fighting over essentially the same issues, and face a common threat of government intervention to criminalize worker job action.

Just days after the workers at British Columbia’s ports voted overwhelmingly for strike action, the ILWU announced it had

accepted a White House-brokered deal with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) on behalf of 22,000 American dockworkers. A month later the terms of that deal remain secret, as does the one endorsed by the ILWU leadership for workers north of the 49th parallel.

The rejection of either or both tentative contracts would rapidly lead to a new eruption of open struggle at the West Coast ports. Indeed, dockers in both the US and Canada must defy the ILWU bureaucrats and mobilize their class strength through building rank-and-file committees that will fight for the shutting down of all West Coast ports until workers’ just demands are met.

BC dockworkers should repudiate the government-dictated contract with a massive “No” vote whenever a ratification vote is held. But they should do so with the understanding that they are facing a political struggle. A “No” vote will immediately pose the necessity of relaunching and broadening the strike, both to dockers in America, who confront a similar union/government conspiracy to impose a rotten contract, and to workers across Canada. The development of mass support among manufacturing workers, postal workers, public sector workers, health care workers, transportation workers, and others will be critical to defying a Trudeau government back-to-work law, which would be imposed as soon or even before the dockers resume strike action.

Longshore workers and their allies confront the entire ruling class, which views the functioning of the ports at full-throttle as critical to the war against Russia, its plans for war with China and boosting the “global competitiveness,” i.e., profitability, of Canadian capitalism.

All this underscores that if West Coast port workers in Canada are to prevail, they must take their fight out of the hands of the ILWU bureaucracy, which is nothing but a junior partner of the trade union-NDP-backed Liberal government. They must form their own democratic organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to unify dockers in struggle across North America and make their fight the spearhead of a mass worker-led counter-offensive against the ruling class’ program of austerity and war.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact