

# Canada's West Coast dockers resume strike after rejection of sellout tentative contract

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*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. We are fighting for the building of rank-and-file strike committees so that workers can rally mass working-class support and defeat the the plans of the Liberal government and corporate Canada to use an emergency back-to-work law to break the strike.*

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**Update:** At the behest of the Trudeau government, the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), and corporate Canada as a whole, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) has ruled the resumed BC dockworkers' strike "illegal" and ordered the union to immediately order workers to return to work.

No sooner had the ruling been issued Wednesday morning, than federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan issued a tweet crowing that the strike by the 7,400 BC dockers is "illegal." Late the previous evening he had issued a press release deplored the strike's resumption Tuesday afternoon and vowed the Liberal government would end it forthwith.

The CIRB's dictatorial ruling underscores that the dockworkers are in a political struggle against the pro-big business, union-NDP backed Liberal government. All workers across North America should come to their immediate defence.

A special appeal should be made to the 22,000 US West Coast dockers, who have been without a contract for a year and similarly face the threat of government action to illegalize any strike.

The CIRB justified its anti-democratic ruling with the claim that the union did not give the requisite 72-hour notice of a strike. This is a sham. The only reason workers were back on the job, is because the ILWU top brass surrendered to state intimidation.

Last Thursday it accepted a sellout tentative agreement, dictated by the government, and ordered workers to go back to work without any vote. Yet that was all "legal" under the rigged, pro-employer collective bargaining system enforced by the CIRB.

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Canada's 7,400 west coast dockers resumed strike action at

4:30 p.m. Pacific time Tuesday afternoon, after union delegates—acting under immense rank-and-file pressure—rejected a proposed four-year agreement that had been dictated by the government and endorsed by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union's (ILWU) top brass.

With the resumption of the strike, the dockworkers face a head-on clash with the federal Liberal government, which, with the connivance of the union apparatus, last week sought to break the dockers' strike by invoking a seldom used provision of Canada's pro-employer Labour Code. It allowed the government to propose a settlement, drafted by a senior Labour Department official, and then give the union and the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) just 24 hours to accept or reject it.

Implicit in this anti-democratic maneuver was the threat that if the union balked at accepting a sellout agreement, the Liberal government would immediately recall parliament and ram through emergency strikebreaking legislation.

Led by ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton, the union leadership endorsed the government's proposal. Last Thursday, just 10 minutes before Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan's ultimatum was set to expire, the union announced that it had accepted the government-authored settlement and was ordering an immediate end to the strike, then in its 13th day.

The ILWU leaders did so because they and their allies in the Canadian Labour Congress feared that if the strike continued it would become a political challenge to the union- and NDP-supported big business Liberal government and could trigger a broader working class upsurge, including sympathy strikes by US west coast longshore workers and workers across Canada who have been targeted by strikebreaking laws.

Workers, however, had other ideas. They quickly made clear their anger over the short-circuiting of the strike, without their demands for wage increases commensurate with inflation, protection against automation and an end to the contracting out of maintenance work being met. Although the ILWU kept details of the four-year tentative agreement secret, opposition began to mount on social media as information began to leak out.

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Not a fair deal. BCMEA group continues to make billions while the hard

workers get peanuts. Rob Ashton sold us out. I guess he will be looking for a management job somewhere.”

Another wrote, “We must keep up with inflation. They’re saying inflation is at 7-8 percent. It’s really at 14 percent. We cannot accept this. We will become poor. This is the Liberal government’s goal. Don’t let it slip past your eyes.”

A third, a female dockworker, pointed to the brutal work regime imposed by the shipping companies and port operators, which have made money hand over fist, while workers put their lives at risk by working through the pandemic. She outlined the following demands: “Full time stable shifts. End rotating shiftwork. Automatic progression on hours worked.

End on call and have 48 hours notice of shifts. Have manning language for safety.”

A railroader who works on the Vancouver docks offered this message for other workers about the renewal of the strike: “You don’t get anything without a fight. The employers just take and take and take. So you have to fight or they’ll keep taking. We’re costing them \$900 million a day, and even for a billionaire, that’s going to start bugging you before too long.”

In the press release published Tuesday afternoon that announced the strike’s resumption, union president Ashton reported that the ILWU Canada Longshore Caucus, which is comprised of several hundred union delegates representing all twelve locals, had rejected the union bargaining team-endorsed settlement. He did not provide vote totals.

Ashton gave three reasons for the rejection of the agreement that he had recommended: it failed to put an end to the contracting out of work; “the employers have not addressed the cost of living issues that our workers face”; and a four-year contract “is far too long” in “today’s uncertain times.”

If a faction of the union bureaucracy ultimately came out against the tentative agreement, it was only to ensure that they retained control over the rank-and-file.

As the WSWS previously noted in reference to the leadership of the Vancouver-based Local 500, which was the first to break ranks with Ashton:

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.

The rank-and-file repudiation of the tentative agreement is a stunning rebuke of both the federal Liberal government and the ILWU Canada and International leaderships.

It poses the immediate necessity of broadening the struggle and making it the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against the ruling class agenda of austerity, war, and attacks on democratic and social rights, including the right to strike.

Labour Minister O’Regan and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra issued a statement late Tuesday night that signalled the Trudeau Liberal government intends to quickly move to criminalize longshore strike. It proclaimed the rejected pro-employer, government-authored tentative contract “a fair and balanced deal,” and said the government would have more to say today on its plans to force a quick end to the strike. It concluded, threateningly, “We have respected the collective bargaining process. But we need our ports operating.”

Urgent appeals must be made for real support from US West Coast dock workers, who have been without a contract for a year and face the similar twin threats of a sellout agreement negotiated by the ILWU, and state action to illegalize a strike. This should include a rank-and-file enforced ban on any “hot cargo,” that is shipments rerouted from BC’s ports.

Dockworkers must also connect their struggle with the workers across Canada, including the 1,400 National Steel Car workers on strike in Hamilton, Ontario as well as the tens of thousands of striking Hollywood writers and actors who are fighting a myriad of abuses by the US-based global entertainment and media monopolies.

With their strike costing the employers hundreds of millions of dollars every day and a strike wave developing across North America, dockworkers are in an objectively powerful position. However, if the BC dockworkers are to develop their struggle and prevail, they must wrest control of the strike from the ILWU bureaucrats through the building of rank-and-file strike committees at every port facility.



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