

Mobilize North American workers to defend Canadian dockers, defeat government strikebreaking!

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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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 plans of the Liberal government and corporate Canada to use an emergency back-to-work law to break the strike.*

Workers across North America must mobilize in defence of the 7,400 Canadian West Coast dockworkers.

As a consequence of their fight for wage increases at least equal to inflation and improved job protections—demands shared by all workers, private and public sector alike—the dockworkers find themselves pitted in a direct political confrontation with the trade union-backed Liberal government, the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state and all of corporate Canada.

On Wednesday morning, little more than 12 hours after rank-and-file pressure had forced the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) apparatus to sanction the resumption of strike action, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) declared the walkout “illegal” and ordered the union to instruct British Columbia’s dockers to immediately return to work.

No sooner had the CIRB delivered its ruling than federal Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan issued a tweet crowing that the resumed dockworkers’ strike “is illegal.” Late on the previous evening, O’Regan had issued a press statement deploring the resumption of the strike and vowing to get “our ports operating” forthwith.

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.

On July 13, they accepted a sellout tentative agreement, dictated by the government under a little-used provision of the Labour Code and ordered workers to return to work without any vote. Even now, workers have yet to be informed as to the terms of the agreement the union bargaining committee tried to foist on them.

Yet that was all “legal” under the rigged, pro-employer collective bargaining system enforced by the CIRB.

The ILWU has now complied with the CIRB order and on its instructions workers have taken down their picket lines. But with workers fuming over the state attack on their rights and the media’s attempts, parroting management propaganda, to smear them as “overpaid” and “privileged,” the union had to issue a 72-hour strike notice Wednesday morning. It told workers to prepare to relaunch a legal strike, beginning Saturday at 9 a.m. Pacific Time. Within hours though, ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton issued a one-sentence memo announcing that the

strike notice had been withdrawn “effective immediately,” leaving workers in the lurch.

Expand the struggle: Build rank-and-file strike committees!

If the workers are to prevail in their struggle, they must appeal for support from the entire North American working class to meet the twin threats they now face. First, that any further job action will be illegalized, possibly even before it begins; and second, that the ILWU apparatus, which just in the past week has twice surrendered to state intimidation or outright strikebreaking, will use the threat of government intervention to try to push through another sellout agreement.

To mobilize the social power of the North American working class in their defence, the BC dockworkers must seize control of their struggle through the building of rank-and-file strike committees. The ILWU bureaucracy, which is closely allied with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the NDP, is implacably opposed to mounting a mass working class industrial and political offensive against the very Trudeau government they all support on the grounds it is a “progressive” alternative to Pierre Poilievre and his Conservatives.

The BC dockers should make a special appeal for support from their class brothers and sisters who work at America’s West Coast ports. Fellow members of the ILWU, they have been without a contract for a year and also face the threat of government intervention to criminalize any job action.

Unified action by Canadian and American dockworkers would cut across the plans of the global shipping giants to reroute cargo through US ports, and strengthen the hand of the Canadian strikers in their fight to defy a back-to-work law. The political leadership and organizational coordination for such an international struggle can be provided by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees (IWA-RFC), which fights to mobilize workers in opposition to the nationalist union bureaucracies on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective.

No less important is the rallying of support from postal workers, healthcare workers, manufacturing workers, autoworkers, and others across Canada to unite with the dockers in opposition to the Trudeau government’s abrogation of workers’ democratic and social rights.

All workers in Canada have a direct interest in defeating a back-to-work law or some other form of state-imposed settlement, since similar methods have and will be used against them. Just in recent years, strikebreaking legislation has been used to criminalize strikes by—and impose the bosses’ terms on—Quebec construction workers, federal postal workers, Ontario

education workers and Montreal dockworkers, among others.

Conditions are extremely favourable for the development of such a broad-based movement in the working class. A strike wave is currently developing across North America, including ongoing strikes by tens of thousands of US screenwriters and actors, 1,400 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario, and 1,400 Wabtec workers in Erie, Pennsylvania. The contract for over 300,000 UPS workers expires in just over a week, and it is less than two months until contracts expire for 170,000 autoworkers on both sides of the Canada-US border.

The logic of the struggle to mobilize North American workers in support of the Canadian dockworkers is the development of a mass worker-led counteroffensive against capitalist austerity and imperialist war. The beating back of the drive by the ruling elite to use state power to enforce low wages, unsafe working conditions and brutal methods of exploitation, will pose the need for a political struggle for workers' power. This will enable society's resources to be redistributed to secure decent paying, secure jobs for all and put an end to rampant corporate profiteering at the expense of the health and well-being of working people and their families.

Trudeau convenes emergency cabinet committee to plot against the dockers

The Trudeau government has long been laying the political groundwork for the recall of parliament and the adoption of a draconian antistrike law. The numerous statements from Trudeau, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, O'Regan and other ministers, blaming the workers for "disrupting" the economy and declaring that the "limits" to "collective bargaining" have been reached, indicate that such an attack is only hours away.

Late Wednesday afternoon, CBC revealed that Trudeau had convened a meeting of his cabinet's Incident Response Group, a body which is officially described as an "emergency committee that will convene in the event of a national crisis or during incidents elsewhere that have major implications for Canada."

Meanwhile, big business, Conservative opposition leader Poilievre, and numerous right-wing premiers are baying for the smashing of the strike. The Biden administration—which is troubled by the strike's impact on the US economy (BC ports account for 15 percent of US shipping) and fears its impact on US West Coast longshore workers—is also no doubt pressing Trudeau to criminalize the dockers' struggle.

Canada's imperialist ruling class views the dockworkers' strike as an intolerable disruption to the supply chains upon which it and its US imperialist ally depend to wage war against Russia and prepare for war with China. They also are determined to boost the "global competitiveness," that is the profitability of Canadian capitalism, by intensifying the exploitation of the working class by imposing inflation-driven real wage cuts and using contracting-out and automation to slash jobs and impose speed-up. This was what O'Regan meant when he declared last week that the BC dockers' strike threatens the "national interest."

If they are to successfully defy back-to-work legislation or a government-dictated contract imposed by other means, dockworkers will have to contend with some false friends.

First among these are the ILWU Canada and International leaderships. They have systematically downplayed the threat of a government strikebreaking law and have refused to advance any viable strategy, based on a turn to the working class, to defy and defeat one. While issuing loud declamations against government intervention, ILWU Canada president Rob Ashton and his cronies in the International leadership folded without

a fight when faced with O'Regan's ultimatum to accept the government-dictated contract. Only the strength of opposition from the rank and file compelled the bureaucracy to restart the strike, which it felt was necessary to retain control of the situation.

The ILWU leadership has also done everything to keep the struggles of Canadian and US dockworkers hermetically sealed off from each other. In the US, the ILWU connived with the Biden administration to impose a phantom tentative agreement on 22,000 dockworkers to prevent them from being in a position to strike at the same time as their Canadian colleagues. More than one month after that agreement was announced, workers still do not know what it contains.

While mouthing soothing words of "solidarity," the rest of the union bureaucracy will work to block any action in defence of the dockers. The Canadian Labour Congress, which claims to speak on behalf of millions of workers, and Unifor, the country's largest private-sector union with over 300,000 members, are the staunchest supporters of the very same Trudeau Liberal government that is gutting the rights and conditions of dockworkers.

The NDP has also postured as an opponent of a government back-to-work law, issuing hollow appeals for the government to respect "free collective bargaining." But if the Liberal government is in a position to enforce the dictates of corporate Canada so ruthlessly, it is above all due to the fact that the NDP has propped it up in parliament, ensuring it has a majority on key votes, since 2019.

In the spring of 2022, the NDP codified this arrangement by reaching a "confidence-and-supply" agreement with the Liberals that stopped just short of a government coalition. The agreement, which was brokered by the Canadian Labour Congress, pledges the NDP to keep Trudeau in power through June 2025 as he imposes the costs for Canadian imperialism of waging war around the world on the backs of working people.

Workers must repudiate the union/NDP/Liberal alliance and forge themselves into an independent political force in opposition to big business, all its political representatives and its agenda of imperialist war, intensified worker exploitation and reaction. This necessitates above all a political fight for the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program by dockworkers and their supporters throughout the working class. Only through the struggle to place political power in the hands of the working class and for the socialist transformation of society will it be possible to put an end to social inequality, poverty and economic insecurity, state repression and war. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) in the closest collaboration with its co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge all who agree with this program to contact us today and join the SEP.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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