Trudeau denounces Canadian dockers' "unacceptable" opposition to government-dictated contract, vows ports "can't be disrupted"

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For the third time in just six days, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) capitulated to the strikebreaking actions of Canada's Liberal government when it called off a strike by 7,400 West Coast dockworkers scheduled to begin Saturday, July 22, at 9 a.m. ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton announced the cancellation of the strike-notice Wednesday evening, shortly after the conclusion of a meeting of the government's emergency Incident Response Group convened by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to discuss "all available options" to prevent, and if necessary suppress, a strike.

Making clear that it was his government that had given the ILWU top brass its marching orders, Trudeau denounced rank-and-file dockworkers Thursday. In comments delivered in Kingston, Ontario, he declared, "I think we were all dismayed, to be honest, when we found out that a good deal that had been worked out at the table that was agreed to both by union leadership and by the management had been suddenly rejected and they were back in a strike position. This was unacceptable."

Trudeau's remark sums up the venomous hostility of his government and Canada's ruling elite to the democratic rights of all workers. What he found "unacceptable" was that a sellout contract dictated by a senior federal mediator on the orders of Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan and agreed to by Ashton and a handful of other well-paid ILWU bureaucrats was met with anger and opposition by rank-and-file dockers. The tentative agreement clearly met none of the workers' demands, including wage increases that keep pace with inflation, an end to contracting out, and job protection against automation.

There is no other explanation why the bureaucracy would have deemed it necessary to keep the details secret from workers, and continues to do so. So strong was the opposition that the ILWU Canada Caucus, which is comprised of union delegates, voted it down—reportedly overwhelmingly—after two days of discussions Tuesday. This forced an immediate resumption of the strike that had paralyzed British Columbia's ports from July 1-13.

Trudeau's violent objection to the workers' refusal to accept the government-dictated contract underscores that far more is at stake for corporate Canada in the dockers' struggle than the terms of a new contract. The 13-day strike that began July 1 and was briefly resumed this week objectively cut across Canadian imperialism's policy of waging war in alliance with US imperialism against Russia and preparing for a military conflict with China. It has disrupted supply chains that are critical to North America's armament industry and to the supply of the US and Canadian militaries' operations and those of their allies worldwide.

At the same time, the Trudeau government is committed to make Canadian capitalism "globally competitive" by increasing worker-exploitation through inflation-driven real wage cuts, speed-up and job cuts. Under conditions in which the dockers' strike is just one example of a powerful resurgence of the class struggle across North America, corporate Canada is determined to send a message to other sections of workers about what they will face if they dare challenge its class war agenda.

For all these reasons, O'Regan and the Trudeau government as a whole responded to the strike's relaunch Tuesday with ferocity. They prevailed upon the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), a government body that functions as a key mechanism of the anti-worker "collective bargaining" system, to issue a "cease and desist" order against the ILWU, backed up with a crowing declaration from O'Regan that the relaunched strike was "illegal."

Trudeau then personally led a meeting of the Incident Response Group, a highly secretive body tasked with formulating the government's response to a "national crisis" or threats to Canada's "national security interests" and upon which the senior-most military and national-security officials sit.

According to a partial readout of Wednesday's meeting, "The Prime Minister stressed the critical importance of resuming operations in our ports as soon as possible. Workers and employers across Canada—and all Canadians—cannot face further disruption. He asked ministers and senior officials their advice toward achieving this goal and directed them to pursue all available options to ensure the stability of our supply chains and to protect Canadian jobs and our economy."

A major topic of discussion at the meeting was the government's "options" for ending the dispute without recalling parliament from

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its summer recess and imposing a back-to-work law–a process that would take the better part of a week. One option reportedly under consideration is invoking a provision in the Canada Labour Code that allows the government to force workers to vote on a proposed agreement, with the vote overseen by the CIRB.

Yet given the depth of opposition to the government-dictated contract among rank-and-file workers, securing passage of the agreement in this way would be anything but certain. In an attempt to retain the sham of "free collective bargaining," the government therefore chose to rely on its partners in the ILWU bureaucracy to call off the strike and resume negotiations with the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association, all the while issuing behind-the-scenes threats of as yet unspecified state repression against the dockers.

The ILWU leadership dutifully bowed to its masters in the Trudeau government, issuing a one-sentence statement tersely rescinding the 72-hour strike notice it delivered to the BCMEA Wednesday morning, after abiding by the CIRB ruling that declared the resumed strike illegal.

Even as it had threatened to relaunch the strike Saturday, the ILWU leadership headlined its news release announcing this "ILWU to reissue strike notice with hope of returning to the bargaining table." In other words it was desperately maneuvering to head off a strike, but trying to do so in a manner that didn't further undermine its credibility and legitimacy with the rank-and-file.

This is in keeping with the union's conduct throughout the dockworkers' struggle. Although the government intervened in the dispute early on and the employers have been baying for state action against the dockers from day-one, the ILWU has never provided workers with any strategy to oppose a government-dictated settlement, whether imposed by a back-to-work law or some other means.

There can be little doubt that the rest of the union bureaucracy, led by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), is feverishly working behind the scenes to finalize and help impose a sellout on the dockers. Former CLC President Hassan Yussuff, who was appointed to the Senate, Canada's upper house of parliament, by Trudeau for services rendered to the ruling elite, was already present in Vancouver at contract talks last week.

The CLC is one of the Trudeau government's key pillars of support, together with the union-sponsored New Democratic Party, which secures the minority government its parliamentary majority. In comments Wednesday, British Columbia's NDP Premier David Eby leant his support to a government-imposed settlement, urging the Trudeau government to do "everything possible" to get the ILWU and BCMEA back to the "bargaining table."

The events of the past 24 hours have further underscored the correctness of the analysis made by the Socialist Equality Party that workers confront a political struggle. Dockers are pitted against the profit-hungry shipping giants, the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government, the capitalist state apparatus, and its servants in the union bureaucracy.

But dockers are in a powerful position to defeat this conspiracy because their struggle is unfolding amid an upsurge of the class struggle across the continent as workers rebel against decades of austerity and concessions and the past two years of punishing price increases.

As the SEP statement "Mobilize North American workers to defend Canadian dockers, defeat government strikebreaking!" argued, "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 statement stressed that dockworkers must make a special appeal to their American West Coast longshore colleagues—who are members of the same union, have been working without a contract for almost a year, and are faced with a like threat of government strikebreaking—to refuse to handle all rerouted shipping and join a unified cross-border struggle.

Emphasizing the need to break the control of the union bureaucracy over the struggle, the statement explained, "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 and the NDP, is implacably opposed to mounting a mass working class industrial and political offensive against the very Trudeau government they all support."

The events of the past two days have only underscored the urgency of dock workers taking the struggle into their own hands. The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will give them every support in this necessary endeavour.

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