

West Coast Canadian dockers on collision course with union-backed federal Liberal government after rejecting tentative agreement

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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. Under conditions where the union bureaucracy has bowed to a big business Liberal government as it moves to impose a pro-company contract, it is more important than ever that workers break the ILWU's gag order.

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada (ILWU) announced late Friday that 7,400 West Coast dockworkers voted down a government-dictated tentative agreement recommended by the union bureaucracy. The courageous stand is a stunning rebuke to the federal Liberal government, the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), and the ILWU bureaucracy led by President Rob Ashton, all of whom conspired to ram a rotten sellout down the throats of workers.

With their “No” vote, dockers have shown their determination to continue their struggle for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, job protection against automation and an end to contracting out. But the urgent task they now confront is to break out of the straitjacket imposed upon them by the ILWU leadership and wage a working-class political struggle against the union-backed Trudeau government and its allies in the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

The Trudeau government has already made clear in a statement responding to the rejection of the agreement that a renewed strike will not be tolerated and it is prepared for “all options and eventualities” to stop it. Opposing this state-led onslaught necessitates the building of rank-and-file committees at every port to prepare strike action and a broadening of the struggle to other sections of workers in Canada and the US, including American dockworkers in the ILWU who are labouring without a contract, to defy all efforts by the government to illegalize job action and enforce a sellout.

The ILWU leadership has already underscored that it will do everything in its power to prevent further strike action. In a terse press release announcing the repudiation by the rank-and-file of the deal it had recommended, the ILWU bureaucracy's only

proposal was that the employers come directly to the bargaining table instead of negotiating through the BCMEA. No strike date was provided by the union, which must give 72 hours of notice before a walkout under Canada's pro-employer “labour relations” laws. Nor were details on the vote totals provided.

The suggestion by Ashton and the remaining ILWU bureaucrats that a “fair deal” can be negotiated with the profit-hungry shipping companies as part of the “collective bargaining” process is a sham. The Trudeau government intervened on the side of the employers early on and has made clear that it will tolerate no other outcome than the imposition of a contract to protect the shippers' and terminal operators' massive profits and secure Canadian imperialism's supply chains.

Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan invoked the anti-worker Canada Labour Code to break a 13-day strike by dockers earlier this month. O'Regan seized on a provision that gave a government-appointed mediator 24 hours to draft a tentative agreement, and the BCMEA and ILWU 24 hours to accept it. After the ILWU rolled over without a fight to this scandalous ultimatum, the strike came to an end.

If the union bureaucrats and pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government had gotten their way, this would have spelt the end of the struggle. But a meeting of the ILWU Longshore Canada Caucus felt compelled to reject the agreement and relaunch the strike under pressure from strong rank-and-file opposition. O'Regan intervened once again, prevailing upon the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to issue an emergency “cease and desist” order against the ILWU to immediately end the “unlawful” strike. The ILWU agreed to this flagrant attack on workers' democratic rights and went even further by agreeing to put the rotten government-dictated agreement to a vote of all members and recommend that it be passed.

In his statement on the rejection of the government-dictated tentative agreement, O'Regan explicitly referred to the July 19 meeting of the Trudeau government's Incident Response Group (IRG). The IRG includes several government ministers, and the heads of the military and spy agencies. The group's purpose is to respond to issues affecting Canada's “national interests” and

“national security.”

Based on these secretive discussions, O’Regan declared that the government intends to rely on the unelected CIRB to ram through the sellout agreement. The Labour Minister noted in his statement, “As Minister of Labour, I am using my authorities under Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to preserve industrial peace. I have directed the Canada Industrial Relations Board to determine whether the union’s rejection of the tentative agreement has eliminated the possibility of a negotiated resolution.

“If the Board determines that to be the case, I have directed them to either impose a new collective agreement on the parties or impose a final binding arbitration to resolve outstanding terms of the collective agreement.”

In other words, the same group of government-appointed officials who declared the dockers’ strike “unlawful” get to determine who will administer the poison pill to the workers. The only issue yet to be determined is whether the CIRB will directly enforce the sellout or use the screen of an “impartial” arbitrator, i.e., a pro-employer stooge, to secure the imposition of what is still absurdly referred to as a “collective agreement.” In the extremely unlikely event that the CIRB fails to follow the government’s orders, O’Regan’s reference to “all options” underlines that the government remains ready to enforce a back-to-work law to criminalize future strikes or other job action.

The aggressiveness of the government’s intervention arises from the fact that for the ruling class as a whole, far more is at stake than the terms of the dockers’ next contract. The strike earlier this month by 7,400 workers across 30 British Columbia ports represented objectively a challenge to North America’s twin imperialist powers in the United States and Canada.

First, it cut across their waging of war against Russia in Ukraine by disrupting the transportation of military equipment and other critical supplies. Secondly, the strike undermined efforts to consolidate North America as an economic bloc capable of waging trade wars and ultimately military conflicts against Washington and Ottawa’s geostrategic rivals around the world.

British Columbia’s docks are a key component of the continent-wide delivery of raw materials and manufactured goods to supply the economic sectors necessary for securing Canadian and American imperialism’s global domination. Finally, Canada’s ruling elite is fully committed to establishing the country’s “global competitiveness,” i.e., the ruthless exploitation of working people, to boost corporate profitability.

The ILWU leadership and entire trade union bureaucracy are strident in their support of this course. The unions, including the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and Unifor, are a key prop of support for the Trudeau Liberal government. Summing up the anti-worker character of the bureaucracy, CLC leader Bea Bruske issued a message of congratulations to O’Regan after he retained his post as Labour Minister in last week’s cabinet shuffle by Trudeau.

Dockworkers must respond to the class war agenda spearheaded by the Trudeau government and its backers in the union bureaucracy and NDP with their own political struggle. This necessitates that they follow up their courageous “No” vote in the face of government threats and intimidation with a powerful

appeal to the North American working class for support. A direct appeal must be issued to American dockworkers, who have been forced to work for a year without a contract and are members of the same ILWU that is conniving to stab Canadian dockers in the back.

The struggle must also be broadened to other sections of workers across North America, including the nearly 20,000 Canadian and over 140,000 American autoworkers whose contracts expire in September. All sections of workers have a direct stake in defeating the draconian measures employed by the state apparatus to impose real wage cuts and the gutting of conditions and rights on port workers.

The favourable conditions for such a rebellion are shown by the fact that the dockers are just the most prominent of several groups of workers who have recently rejected sellout contracts negotiated by union bureaucracies. This includes more than 1,400 workers on strike for more than a month at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, around 250 Windsor Salt workers who have been on the picket lines since February and 3,700 grocery workers at the Metro chain in the Greater Toronto Area who walked out over the weekend.

The waging of such a struggle imperatively demands that dockworkers tear themselves away from the nationalist and pro-corporatist ILWU leadership. Rank-and-file committees must be built to broaden the struggle and give it a political leadership directed against the government’s pro-war, pro-austerity agenda.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in a recent statement, “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.”



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