

# Canadian West Coast dockers set to vote on yet another government-dictated 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. Under conditions where the union bureaucracy has bowed to the 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.*

Some 7,400 dockers on Canada's West Coast are voting today and Friday on a third government-dictated tentative contract after International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) negotiators agreed to a slightly amended version of the one repudiated by the workers last week.

The agreement was reached late Sunday night following a further anti-democratic intervention by the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), a government agency. Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan had ordered the CIRB to find a way to impose a settlement, while vowing that the federal Liberal government would ensure no "further disruption"—i.e. worker job action. The dockers struck for 13 days in early July and then again on July 18-19. "The Government," declared O'Regan's Saturday morning statement, "is prepared for all options and eventualities."

Throughout the dockworkers' struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned that in their fight to win wage increases to keep pace with inflation and enhanced protection against automation and contracting-out workers face a political struggle against the big business Liberal government, which stands four-square behind the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA). We have further warned that the ILWU bureaucrats and their Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and New Democratic Party (NDP) allies are all vehemently opposed to the mass mobilization of the working class necessary to beat back the state strike-breaking.

The events leading up to and following Sunday's tentative agreement vindicate these warnings in full. First, the ILWU refused to set a new strike date after the rank-and-file rejected the latest government-dictated, ILWU leadership-endorsed agreement. Nor did its terse statement announcing the rejection make any appeal to the working class to rally to the support of the dockers as they prepare for a head-on clash with the government.

The union's refusal to even issue the legally-required 72-hour strike notice allowed the government to once again try to use the CIRB to suppress the strike, rather than recalling parliament to push through an emergency anti-strike law, which would be both more time consuming and politically explosive.

## A flagrant attack on workers' rights

The order the CIRB issued to the ILWU and BCMEA Monday, after ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton and the union brass had agreed to the latest tentative agreement underscores that workers are facing a flagrant and ongoing attack on their democratic rights. It revealed that CIRB officials directly joined the talks in Vancouver Sunday, effectively dictating the terms of the proposed settlement. As the order states, "The Board met with the parties on July 30, 2023, and assisted the parties in reaching a negotiated memorandum of settlement for the renewal of their collective agreement."

The CIRB forced the ILWU Canada leadership and all five local presidents to sign a letter distributed to the membership recommending passage of the agreement. Having enforced this condition, the CIRB order went on to cynically state, "The Board reminds ILWU leadership that it can be considered an unfair labour practice for union leadership to unanimously support a settlement agreement and subsequently change its position through the ratification process."

In other words, the board is giving notice that if the vote fails to produce the outcome it desires, it will declare an "unfair labour practice" by the union and impose the sellout anyway.

To strengthen its order, the CIRB called for a gag order on the union, with both parties allowed to issue only "a single joint" message to the media overseen and printed by the CIRB.

From all reports the new agreement is virtually identical to the one already rejected by rank-and-file dockers. The BCMEA reported last week that the original tentative agreement included a compounded wage increase of 19.2 percent, which falls well short of inflation. Continuing its vicious campaign to demonize dockworkers that it has waged throughout the dispute, the BCMEA, which includes companies that have made gargantuan profits in recent years, asserted that the wage increase would allow top-paid dockers to earn over \$160,000 per year. This propaganda claim, based on the vastly inflated annual salary for a docker of \$136,000, ignores the fact that only about 1 percent of dockers earn this wage, and only if they work night and graveyard shifts.

The original agreement would also have included a \$3,000 signing bonus. In addition, an 18.5 percent increase to a "modernization and mechanization" retirement payout was announced. This initiative is aimed at encouraging workers to retire as the shipping giants impose job cuts through automation.

The main bone of contention at the July 30 talks appears to have been the language in the agreement concerning contracting out. The

original tentative agreement reportedly stated that “normal maintenance” would be performed by union labour, giving the employers a wide latitude to further expand contracting out. An adjustment to the wording of this clause was likely made, though no details has been publicly released.

The CIRB’s aggressive intervention on behalf of the government and employers underscores the entirely rigged character of the “collective bargaining” system. Whenever workers are in a position of strength, which the dockers are thanks to their ability to shut down large sections of the economy and the development of a massive strike wave by workers across North America, the state apparatus intervenes to uphold the interests of corporate Canada. The ILWU and the entire union bureaucracy, which are key props of the Trudeau Liberal government, collaborate with the bosses and government ministers to prevent working-class opposition to the ruling elite’s class war agenda from emerging.

### **For a political struggle against the union, NDP-backed Liberal government**

The Liberal government’s determination to pull out all the stops to force an end to the dockers’ struggle reflects the fact that it objectively represents a challenge to the ruling elite’s policies of imperialist war abroad and attacks on workers’ social and democratic rights at home. This two-front war demands the prevention of any disruption to North America’s supply chains, which serve to transport military equipment for the US/NATO war on Russia and other goods across the continent and thereby bolster the American and Canadian ruling classes’ drive to maximize profits and secure strategic resources. These policies aim to consolidate a US-led protectionist trade bloc enabling North America’s twin imperialist powers to challenge their geostrategic rivals around the world economically and ultimately militarily as well.

In its crusade to impose below-inflation wages and the gutting of dockers’ job protections and other rights, the Liberal government enjoys the full support of the trade union bureaucracy and NDP. While issuing militant declamations against government intervention during the 13-day strike to placate anger among rank-and-file workers, the ILWU has never advanced a strategy to resist the Trudeau government’s bullying and intimidation of dockworkers. This is no accident. It is a member of the Canadian Labour Congress, a central pillar of support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals. Summing up where the union bureaucracy stands in this fight, CLC President Bea Bruske issued a message of congratulations to O’Regan after he retained his post during a recent cabinet shuffle—the same O’Regan who has robbed dockers of their democratic rights and is spearheading efforts to ram a government-dictated settlement down their throats.

The NDP has secured the minority Liberal government in parliament a majority since 2019. For over a year, the party has been in a “confidence-and-supply” deal with Trudeau that stopped just short of a government coalition and commits the NDP to supporting the Liberals through June 2025.

After dockers courageously voted down the original tentative agreement last Friday, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh issued a cynical statement. “We’re urging the federal government to get both sides back at the table,” declared Singh. “New Democrats will always stand

with workers trying to negotiate wages that keep up with inflation, safer workplaces, and job security that families depend on.”

Singh got his wish. The federal government intervened to “get both sides back at the table” through the CIRB to all but dictate the terms of the settlement, gag union officials from speaking out about it, and demand a forced-march vote giving workers just a few days to review the agreement. What’s more, his claim that the NDP “will always stand with workers” is an outrageous lie. His party is in alliance with a government that has repeatedly used back-to-work legislation or the threat of it to impose pro-employer contracts on workers, including on postal workers in 2018 and Montreal dockers in 2021. The “confidence-and-supply” agreement frequently defended by Singh gives, in his own words, the Liberals “political stability,” which they are using to wage war on Russia, massively expand military spending, and take the axe to government spending on public services and social programs.

Dockworkers should once again decisively vote down the government-dictated contract they have been presented with. But this can only be the first step in the development of a political struggle not just against the greedy shipping companies, but the Liberal government, its NDP and union backers, and lackeys in the ILWU bureaucracy. The CIRB has stipulated that a “no” vote will result in the ILWU and BCMEA having just two days to submit proposals to convince the board whether a negotiated deal is still possible. That is, even if workers vote the contract down, a group of unelected government appointees will get to determine whether binding arbitration or some other authoritarian measure should be used to force a new contract on them.

Dockers can only prevent this outcome by broadening their struggle. As the Socialist Equality Party argued in a recent statement, “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 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.”



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