

Political lessons of the West Coast Canadian dockworkers' strike

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9 August 2023

Canada's pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government has succeeded in connivance with its allies in the trade union bureaucracy and the New Democratic Party in ramming through a contract for 7,400 West Coast dockworkers in British Columbia that fails to meet their just demands for real, inflation-proof wage increases and protection from job losses due to automation and contracting-out.

After a courageous 13-day strike in early July and the rejection of a government-dictated sellout agreement late last month, 74 percent of workers who cast a ballot voted to accept essentially the same terms in a ratification vote held last Thursday and Friday.

There was nothing democratic about the vote. It was imposed by the government and its Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) through threats and anti-democratic rulings and meekly agreed to by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) top brass. Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan made clear that another rejection of the agreement would trigger government intervention to criminalize any further job action, whether through draconian back-to-work legislation or another mechanism.

Despite these threats, and with the ILWU bureaucracy offering no strategy for victory, over 25 percent of the members who voted rejected the four-year deal, a significant number when one considers that a "No" vote under these conditions meant a direct political challenge to the Trudeau Liberal government.

Key political lessons must be drawn from this experience by dockworkers and the entire working class. Above all, workers in Canada must establish their political and organizational independence from the trade union bureaucracy and New Democrats and develop a mass worker-led counter-offensive across North America to oppose capitalist austerity, war, and attacks on workers' democratic and social rights.

The first lesson is that every major workers' struggle over wages and conditions is at the same time a political fight against the entire big business elite, its political representatives and state, and their class war agenda. The ruling class is determined to make workers pay for imperialist war abroad and the enhanced "competitiveness" of Canadian capitalism, i.e., the profits of the corporations and wealth accumulation of the super-rich, at home.

This fact was especially clear during the dockworkers' struggle, which represented an objective challenge to the ruling class's waging of the US/NATO war on Russia and the buildup to war with China. By disrupting North American supply chains, the dockers hampered the delivery of military equipment and other

gear for the imperialists' war effort and undermined attempts by the governments in Ottawa and Washington to consolidate a continent-wide network of supply chains to provide the economic and logistical basis for waging commercial and shooting wars against their great-power rivals.

The political character of the fight in which dockworkers were engaged was made explicit by the early intervention of the Liberal government into the bargaining process. O'Regan travelled to Vancouver prior to the outbreak of the strike on July 1 and promised not to leave the city until a sellout contract was concluded. To bring the strike to a quick end, he invoked Section 105 (2) of the Canada Labour Code, giving a mediator 24 hours to draft the terms of a tentative agreement and then the parties 24 hours to accept it.

The ILWU leadership obligingly bowed to this outrageous ultimatum, but union delegates in the Longshore Caucus subsequently repudiated the government-dictated tentative agreement amid massive pressure from the rank-and-file. O'Regan then turned to the unelected CIRB, prevailing on the body to issue an emergency "cease and desist" when the dockers resumed strike action.

All the while, O'Regan retained the looming threat of a back-to-work law in the background, underlining that the dockers were up against the government and the full array of powers at the disposal of the capitalist state. O'Regan made no secret of why this was the case, declaring early on that the strike threatened the "national interest," meaning the core interests of Canadian imperialism. Powerful sections of the corporate elite like the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters organization are now demanding that the government go even further and criminalize future strikes on the docks and in other industries deemed "critical infrastructure."

A further lesson powerfully underscored by the dockers' struggle is that the ILWU leadership and the union bureaucracy as a whole are joined at the hip with the Liberal government and the state apparatus. Throughout the conflict, the ILWU bureaucracy bowed to every government ultimatum without a fight, whether it was the initial suspension of the strike, the forcing of the membership to vote on the rotten deal initially rejected by the Longshore Caucus, or the final vote on a virtually identical agreement dictated by the CIRB.

It did so because its primary concern was to defend the nationalist, pro-corporate "collective bargaining" system upon which its privileges rest and through which it imposes the dictates

of big business onto the workers. The union bureaucracy was also terrified that a direct confrontation with the Liberal government could trigger a mass working-class upsurge that they would struggle to control and dangerously destabilize Canadian capitalism. As the Socialist Equality Party explained in a statement on the dockworkers' struggle, "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..."

The ILWU offered no strategy for the workers to confront the government attacks, even though it had to concede that the bargaining strategy of the BC Maritime Employers Association was predicated on government intervention to break any strike. No section of the ILWU leadership appealed to dockworkers in the United States to join the struggle, even though they are members of the very same union, have been working without a contract for a year and are similarly faced with the threat of government strikebreaking.

On the contrary, the ILWU worked tirelessly to keep both struggles hermetically sealed off from each other, including by agreeing, under pressure from the Biden administration, to reach a tentative agreement with Pacific Maritime Association immediately before the strike in Canada began to prevent a joint struggle and the shutting down of all West Coast ports. The ILWU bureaucrats also made no call for the strike's broadening to other sections of workers across Canada, who all have a stake in defeating the big business assault on wages, jobs and working conditions and the ever-widening criminalization of workers' struggles.

The union bureaucracy as a whole ensured that the dockers remained isolated under conditions of the largest strike wave in North America in decades. This strike wave is taking the form of a rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the bureaucracy as expressed in a spate of rejections of union-backed tentative contracts. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), a key pillar of support for the Trudeau government, refused to issue any appeal to the millions of workers it claims to represent to take solidarity action in support of the strikers. Instead, to bolster O'Regan as he gutted workers' democratic rights and helped the profit-hungry shipping giants impose their demands on the workers, the CLC issued a note of congratulations when the Labour Minister retained his post during Trudeau's recent cabinet shuffle.

The conclusion that must be drawn from these experiences is that workers must urgently establish their political and organizational independence from the Liberal/union/NDP alliance. This alliance acts to suppress the class struggle and impose the dictates of the corporations under the guise of "progressive" and "pro-worker" policies.

Trudeau launched a tirade when the initial government-dictated contract was rejected amid widespread rank-and-file anger, thundering that it is "unacceptable" for workers to vote down contracts agreed between government ministers, union bureaucrats and corporate executives.

The Liberals and NDP have been in a formal governmental alliance for over a year, whereby the social democrats give the Liberals the votes and "political stability" they require to carry

through a massive rearmament program, "post-pandemic" austerity, and the evisceration of workers' rights. During the dockers' struggle, BC NDP Premier David Eby repeatedly took the side of the employers, denouncing the strike for disrupting the economy and urging the federal government to intervene.

The unions, at whose behest the NDP struck its "confidence-and-supply" agreement with Trudeau shortly after the eruption of the US-NATO war with Russia, have been key partners of the Liberals since Trudeau came to power in 2015. They supported the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement to consolidate a protectionist trade bloc and spearheaded the back-to-work campaign during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed thousands of lives.

In opposition to the rotten nationalist and pro-imperialist policies pushed by the unions and NDP, workers require an internationalist and socialist strategy. This was powerfully underscored by the dockers' struggle, which could only have succeeded against the globally operating shipping giants if it was coordinated on a continent-wide and international basis.

Even now, the fact that the ILWU has failed to complete the imposition of a White House-dictated tentative agreement on the 22,000 American West Coast dockers could rekindle the fight, since a strike by US dockers would immediately pose their Canadian colleagues with the task of joining the strike to stop the rerouting of cargo. The 170,000 autoworkers in the midst of a contract struggle in the US and Canada confront the same necessity of mounting a joint, cross-border struggle to counter the onslaught of the auto bosses as they seek to offload the costs of the transition to electrical vehicles onto the backs of working people.

Such international coordination is impossible through the pro-capitalist unions and their bloated apparatuses of high-paid functionaries. They are wedded to their "own" nation states and to the corporate elite. Dockworkers and the entire working class must therefore tear themselves away from the suffocating grip of the union apparatus by building rank-and-file committees to place decision-making in the hands of the workers themselves and enable the organization of strikes and other job action across national borders. This is the purpose of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which is fighting to develop a global network and political leadership to guide the rapidly escalating struggles of the working class to victory.



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