

Vote NO on the ILWU contract! Build Rank-and-File Committees to oversee the balloting!

West Coast ILWU carries out vote on contract covering 22,000 dockworkers

Norisa Diaz
15 August 2023

Work on West Coast docks? Tell us what you think about the contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

After forcing 22,000 West Coast dockworkers to labor for over a year without a contract, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has called a vote this week on a tentative agreement with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). Voting began on Tuesday and is running through Thursday for workers in the larger ports in Southern California—Long Beach, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Bay Area workers will begin voting on Friday.

Despite the announcement by the ILWU two months ago that a deal was reached, following the intervention of acting labor secretary Julie Su, the union kept US dockworkers on the job for months without either giving workers any details of the contract or scheduling a vote. This was done, in divide-and-conquer style, to buy the union bureaucracy time until it was able to bring the strike by Canadian West Coast dockworkers, who are also in the ILWU, to a close.

According to ILWU officials, dockworkers ratified the Liberal government-dictated agreement by 74.66 percent on August 4. The contract was virtually identical to the one workers rejected a week prior, but the final vote was held at proverbial gunpoint, after the Canadian government intervened to ban the strike and with the ILWU offering no strategy for victory.

The Long Beach, California online news agency Press Telegram reported that the proposed six-year contract includes a 32 percent pay raise and touted the

supposed “hero bonus” for continuing to work throughout the pandemic, which claimed the lives of hundreds of dockworkers. It states that the “full details of the contract have not been made public, pending completion of the process.” The “hero bonus” will apparently be paid out by the federal government, shielding the PMA from the financial cost.

But there are early signs that workers are furious over the US deal, which includes a \$14 raise spread out over six years. That is “not cool when we’re already behind on the cost of living,” one worker said.

A casual worker in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of roughly 7,000 part-timers who are bound to the contract but have no voting rights, told the WSWS, “They’re gonna have a union meeting this Thursday, where they’ll discuss the contract. This will be the first time most people will be hearing what’s in the contract. As they’re voting on Friday, they won’t have time to process what’s in the contract.

“One of the A-men I talked to says he was going to vote against it. The measly raise is nothing. \$14 over 6 years, inflation is going to erode all that. I would like for them to vote it down. They’re trying to put other clauses in it: you can’t slow down, you can’t strike.”

He continued: “They should demand better pay. They should increase the rates for retirement. That amount needs to be \$300 per month for every year that you worked. They want to raise it to \$255, but it should be \$300.

“If you spend 20 years on the docks, you should at least get \$6,000 a month. If you get social security, maybe you can get to \$10,000 a month. If you’ve got a

mortgage, that's still tough in the Bay Area. A lot of guys are working into their seventies as a result. When you're 70 years old and you can't climb on that ship and lash, when your eyesight is bad and you can't drive a fuel truck anymore, they're not looking at that.

"If you spend five years as a casual, that time should be counted toward retirement. But they [the company] will never agree to something like that ... The casuals are really in a bad place. They tell you not to quit your day job, but why should you be working for a company and if something happens to you on the docks, you have to use your insurance from another job?"

"We had that happen to a casual worker. He got hurt on the job and had to go to the hospital. Then you have to use your insurance from your other job and you have to keep quiet because you're not supposed to be moonlighting at your other job.

"The employers are trying to protect their interest. We're not doing enough to protect our interest ... When it's gonna be a strike that will affect the global supply chain, they're going to try to get involved. We should still go on strike and see how it cripples them. Then they'll give us a fair wage ... If the longshoremen never go on strike, nothing is ever going to be rectified."

Governments on both sides of the border, fearful that such a struggle would bring the North American and global supply chain to a standstill, and threaten both corporate profits and their warmongering against Russia and China, for which the docks play a critical logistical role, have intervened directly against dockworkers under the banner of the "national interest."

The government that brokered the ILWU contract is the same one that imposed a contract on railroad workers last year and banned a strike. On the docks, as on the railroads, the union bureaucracy has played the critical role of enabler for this government intervention.

From the start, the entire "negotiation" process has been carried out in the dark, with unprecedented involvement from the Biden administration. After months of radio silence, and faced with a growing wave of job actions by rank-and-file workers in defiance of a union no-strike pledge, the ILWU suddenly announced a deal in June.

The announcement came only days before the beginning of the strike in Canada, meanwhile the

ILWU refused to hold a strike authorization vote in the US, even allowing cargo ships to be diverted from Canadian ports to US ports, where members of the same union unknowingly scabbed on their Canadian counterparts.

The contract must be voted down, but this is not enough. Workers have to organize themselves to prepare a fight not just against the PMA, but their co-conspirators in the ILWU and the White House. Workers must form rank-and-file committees to fight against this corporatist gang up and appeal for the broadest possible support, including from striking actors and writers, UPS workers and autoworkers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact