

Strong opposition as dockworkers finish voting on West Coast contract

Our reporters
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Are you a dockworker? Tell us what you think about the contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

West Coast dockworkers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) are currently voting on a tentative agreement, the details of which the vast majority of the membership has not been privy to until this week.

Since last May, the ILWU has kept workers on the job without a contract while it has negotiated behind closed doors with the Pacific Maritime Association. A no-strike, no lockout pledge has been enforced by the ILWU even as British Columbia dockworkers, who are also ILWU members, went on strike, with Canadian traffic being diverted to US West Coast ports.

The current tentative agreement for workers in the US West Coast was suddenly announced two months ago in order to clamp down on a growing wave of job actions in defiance of the no strike pledge which threatened to link up with Canadian dockworkers into a continent-wide struggle that could have broken out of the control of the union bureaucrats.

After the deal was announced, no details were released for the next two months until voting began this week. The obvious purpose was to try and ram through the contract before workers had time to adequately study it.

It is vital that dockworkers reject the Biden-backed contract. However, especially with the federal government waiting in the wings, voting ‘no’ is not enough. The fight for decent wages, health care, and improved workplace safety means dockworkers will have to contend with not only the PMA, but their accomplices in the ILWU and the White House.

The same attacks on dockworkers are being repeated throughout the world, whether it’s UPS workers or striking actors and writers. At every step of the way,

workers’ strivings for unified action are being sabotaged by the union bureaucracies, acting on behalf of both management and national governments.

In order to counter the White House-PMA-ILWU conspiracy, dockworkers must form rank-and-file committees to popularize their demands and take the conduct of the struggle out of the control of the ILWU bureaucracy.

Outside of a the San Francisco ILWU hiring hall on Thursday evening, hundreds of workers gathered for an informational session on the tentative agreement before voting commenced. Dockworkers warmly received a team from the *World Socialist Web Site*, taking roughly 150 leaflets.

While most dockworkers, fearful of reprisal from the union bureaucracy, were hesitant to speak on the record, many engaged in discussions over the contract and the broader struggles facing dock workers around the world.

The overall sentiment was clearly for a ‘no’ vote. Workers pointed out the many shortcomings of the tentative agreement, which was the result of direct intervention by acting labor secretary Julie Su.

Many US dockworkers were angry that they did not go on strike with their brothers and sisters in Canada. When asked whether he would have supported a joint strike with British Columbia dock workers, one worker said that he felt “strongly” that they should have struck together. He said this sentiment was not unique to him and that he knew many other workers who felt the same way.

As for the contract itself, one young B-man explained he was voting ‘no’ in defense of retirees and their pensions. Given the billions in profits the shipping companies have lapped up since the onset of COVID-19, many workers feel the pension contributions are insufficient.

Many workers also discussed workplace demands around staffing, working hours, automation, and sanitation, as well as demands over pay, medical benefits for casual workers, and timetables for promotions. A B-man shared a list of demands that were circulating among the rank-and-file.

These include, but are not limited to:

- A deadline that all jobs to stop by 2:00 am;
 - No cuts to medical benefits. Medical insurance should be expanded to include casual dockworkers;
 - Any automating of the docks must include profit sharing for workers effected, split among the workers based on tonnage moved;
 - Cost of living increases to keep pace with inflation.
- The current raises, which amount to 32 percent over 6-years, is in effect a pay cut for dockworkers living in some of the most expensive cities in the world. A San Francisco dockworker noted that the cost-of-living in San Francisco was \$168,000 a year, and that every dockworker should be receiving compensation packages commensurate with that.
- An initial \$20 raise for all dockworkers.

As the pandemic continues to infect and kill, COVID-19 safety remains a major concern. As one dockworker told the WSWS, “We have all either caught COVID or died from COVID, we all should get paid.” The proposed \$70 million ‘hero’ bonus, which is actually from the US government and not the PMA, does not include anything for the families of dockworkers who died on the job.

Another worker pointed to the conspicuous absence of points in the six-year contract that would protect dock workers in case of another pandemic. “There’s no language in the contract about what happens if we’re declared essential workers again. Six years ago, we didn’t know what COVID-19 was.”

A casual dockworker in San Diego told the WSWS,

“the rumor is that casuals will be excluded from receiving retroactive pay from July 1, 2022 [when the last contract officially expired]. Our own local is selling us out.

“They intend to only pay us back pay from the \$70 million Covid funds withheld from us during the pandemic. Management apparently held on to these funds for God knows what. Just strange how something allocated from the government could be withheld from us, and then used in contract negotiations.”

In Los Angeles, WSWS reporters were able to speak with David, an A-man from a long-line of dockworkers. “My grandfather, he’s 93. He’s well respected, well known in San Pedro, he’s one of the generation that worked to get what I enjoy every day. And for me, it’s, you know, I’m very proud of it.

“We get paid good money, but the PMA was making what, billions? A thousand percent increase? And who’s fault is that? It’s the union’s fault for allowing them to do that.

“If we think that [the union] is going to be the guys to fight for us still...You have the same guys that are continuously running the...There is no change.”

Turning to the self-declared “pro-labor” president Joe Biden, David said, “Look at what happened to the engineers for the trains. We all know as soon as they wanted a strike, [Congress] made a law. They said, they can’t strike. Federally, they can’t strike. So what happens then? Where’s the upper hand for them? That is our ‘democratic’ president.”



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