

ILWU ends rushed vote on West Coast dockworkers' tentative agreement

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

A week has passed since voting ended for a six-year contract between 22,000 West Coast dockworkers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA).

Since the voting concluded, there has been no official update on the results from the ILWU, leaving dockworkers in the dark as to the result. Dockworkers in contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* have shared vote totals on proposed amendments from ILWU Local 13 in Los Angeles, which indicated 4,505 voted in favor and 1,838 against.

According to Local 13, the ILWU's Coast Balloting Committee will convene on Thursday, August 31, to announce and certify the results from each local. This delay raises significant questions on the outcome of the vote.

Whether or not this contract has passed, the entire process has been illegitimate and undemocratic. Rank-and-file dockworkers have been completely shut out from the closed-door negotiations, which began last May in San Francisco. While every dockworker is bound by the terms of the agreement, roughly one-third of the workforce, identified as "casual," have no voting rights at all.

Even for dockworkers who can vote on the contract, many only saw the contract for the first time in the last two weeks. It is unclear how many dockworkers across the three tiers—A, B and casual—actually got a copy of the contract.

Throughout the entire "negotiation" process, the union has worked deliberately to keep its members in the dark. It kept silent except for a few press releases confirming that there would not be a strike as long as

the PMA did not lock out workers.

After months of radio silence from the ILWU bureaucracy, dockworkers began to take matters into their own hands earlier this year. This past spring and summer, wildcat strike actions forced major shutdowns at the Ports of Los Angeles, Long Beach and Seattle.

Terrified that these actions would soon be joined by British Columbia dockworkers in Canada who were preparing to strike, President Biden dispatched acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su to San Francisco in June. Within 48 hours of Su's arrival, ILWU President Willie Adams announced a tentative agreement to the membership.

While Canadian dockworkers courageously went on strike for 13 days, the ILWU officials and with the Biden administration continued to enforce a strike ban, while accepting Canadian-bound cargo diverted to US ports.

In Canada last month, the government shut down the strike and imposed an agreement on the dockworkers, who had already voted to reject it. Canadian politicians, enraged by the impact of the strike, have floated legislation intending to outlaw strikes by "infrastructure" workers.

If workers have voted down the US contract, it is possible that the ILWU bureaucracy is now buying the Biden administration more time by in order to prepare an intervention against workers using the Taft-Hartley Act, which has previously been invoked in 1948, 1971 and 2002 on the West Coast. Such a delaying tactic was employed by the bureaucracy of the rail unions last year to buy Congress time to pre-emptively ban a rail strike.

"Everything's top secret. ... We're always left in the dark," John, an A-man, recently told WSWs reporters. "They're [the union officials] not really up front. And

they say, ‘Well, we don’t know, we have to look into that,’ and ‘it’s just kind of the secrecy on everything.’

“When I was a casual,” John continued, “the group before me went in or became full-time at 18 months [before being hired in]. In my group, we had to do 11 years.

“One time we had this meeting, and this [official] gave this speech, and people were asking, ‘Well, what’s going on?’ And the response was, ‘Well, I don’t know.’

“Basically it’s like, ‘Hey, I got my big house. I’ve got plenty of cash. I’m living comfortably. That’s all that matters. I don’t give a damn about you. I don’t give a damn that you’re losing your house. I don’t give a damn that your marriage is breaking up, whatever is going on. It’s not important to me, as long as I’m good.’”

While the union keeps information from its members, what has been revealed in the tentative agreement falls far short of workers’ demands.

The six-year contract contains a 32 percent wage increase, or a little more than 5 percent per year. The tier system, which forces thousands of dockworkers to labor for years on end before they even get the opportunity to vote on a contract or are able to get health insurance, remains in place. It is unclear what, if any guarantees there are against job losses created through automation.

The \$70 million “hero bonus” offered to workers is a drop in the ocean compared to the billions in profits the major shipping companies have doled out to shareholders in the form of dividend payments since the onset of the pandemic.

Last week FreightWaves reported that Germany’s Hapag-Lloyd, the fifth largest shipping line in the world, has paid out \$19.5 billion in dividends since 2021. While the company “only” paid out \$747 million to shareholders in 2021, in 2022 the company boosted this to \$6.56 billion and just this past May issued a \$12.2 billion payout, or the equivalent of 174 “hero” bonuses.

Maersk, the second largest carrier in the world, paid out \$1 billion in dividends in 2021, \$6.8 billion in 2022 and \$10.9 billion earlier this year, for a COVID-19 era total of \$18.7 billion. Freightwaves also examined profits from Zim and Cosco, which totaled \$4.6 billion and \$13.2 billion respectively. Just these four shipping

companies combined to hand out some \$56 billion to shareholders.

“We were awarded hero pay by the federal government, and they [the PMA] are holding on to that,” John said. “So we heard that it’s \$70 million, that it could be up to \$140 million, but we don’t know what the real amount of money is and who’s holding it or what’s going on.

“I think they [the PMA] are holding it back, and they were trying to get us to sign the contract by saying, ‘Okay, we’re not going to give you this money [hero pay] until you sign this contract.’ Yeah, that’s not right because it was issued to us, given to us by the federal government. Why does the PMA have the right to hold it back and determine [what to do with it]?”

The direct intervention by the government shows workers are in a political struggle against the entire corporate-controlled setup. The ports are not only a major economic chokepoint, with some 9 percent of US GDP passing through the Ports of Los Angeles/Long Beach alone, they are also critical to moving military equipment overseas to battlefields in Ukraine against Russia or in the South China Sea against China. A strike would seriously jeopardize the ruling elite’s plans for war.

In order to countermand the union-government-corporate conspiracy, workers must form independent rank-and-file committees in every section of the working class, including dockworkers, autoworkers, postal and logistics workers and other key industries.



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