

Biden hails sellout dockworkers' and UPS agreements ahead of autoworkers' contract expiration

Jacob Crosse
6 September 2023

In a public address from the White House Wednesday afternoon, President Joe Biden hailed the apparent passage of the West Coast dockworkers' contract last week as a "good deal for workers, and for companies and for the United States of America."

In reality, the six-year contract is a major win for the corporations and the Biden administration. Biden is determined to prevent any strikes or stoppages that would impact "national security," that is, US war policy. His statement was made only hours after Secretary of State Antony Blinken landed in Kiev and pledged another \$1 billion in military aid for the US-NATO war against Russia.

On August 31, after more than 13 months of closed-doors "negotiations," the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which purports to represent some 22,000 West Coast dockworkers at 29 ports, announced that the contract between the union and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) had been approved by a margin of 75 percent of eligible voting members.

Like many modern trade unions, the ILWU operates a tier system, separated into A, B and Casual. Over 7,000 casual or "ID" dockworkers are not considered part of the union and are banned from actually voting on the contract that they are forced to labor under for years.

According to figures released by the ILWU, the ratification totals were 8,854 "yes" and 2,997 "no." A further breakdown by the locals reveals that the largest opposition to the contract came from the biggest ports, San Francisco-Oakland and Los Angeles-Long Beach, where 30 percent to 40 percent of the membership voted to reject the contract.

The raises included in the contract—32 percent over six years—will not keep pace with the cost of living for many dockworkers living along the coast from California to Washington. The one-time "hero bonus," for workers that labored during the pandemic, is a fraction of the billions in profits the shipping carriers have siphoned for themselves since the emergence of COVID-19.

While the union is touting the 75 percent margin of approval, well over 2,000 dockworkers who were eligible to vote did not

do so. There are many reasons for this. Dockworkers in contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* said the voting was conducted in-person with paper ballots, making it difficult for workers not living near their local to vote on short notice. Others had no faith in the union bureaucracy to come back with something better and simply refused to cast a ballot.

This did not prevent Biden from championing the agreement as an example of "collective bargaining working." In his Wednesday address, he thanked those in attendance, including ILWU President Willie Adams, saying, "I have known Willie a long time." He praised Adams, PMA CEO Jim McKenna, and acting Labor Secretary Julie Su for "getting the deal done." Su was former Labor Secretary Marty Walsh's deputy last year when Biden and a bipartisan Congress outlawed a strike by 110,000 railroad workers.

Hailing the dockworkers' contract as "historic," Biden breezed past dockworker demands for protections against automation, pay raises that keep pace with inflation, improved pensions, and increased health insurance benefits for casual workers. Instead, Biden declared, "With this contract dockworkers at those 29 ports will get the pay, benefits, and working conditions that I believe they deserve." (Emphasis added)

The contract was not the product of a democratic process among the rank-and-file, but dictated from above by Biden, in order to serve the predatory needs of Wall Street and US imperialism. The dockworker's struggle reveals that the workers are not only engaged in a fight against major corporations, but a political struggle against the entire ruling class and its state apparatus.

This has been borne out throughout the entire "negotiation process," which was deliberately designed to keep rank-and-file dockworkers in the dark and isolated from their class brothers and sisters. For over one year, the ILWU, working with the PMA and the Biden administration, kept dockworkers on the job without a contract or a strike authorization vote. This continued over the summer even after more than 7,200 British Columbia dockworkers, who are also ILWU members, went on strike at the end of June.

Throughout the British Columbia dockers strike, the ILWU in the US refused to call a strike authorization vote and accepted scab cargo diverted from Canadian ports. There is no question that Adams had been given his marching orders from Biden via Su that the administration would allow no strikes that impacted West Coast shipping. Biden stressed in his comments Wednesday the “gigantic economic impact” of the ports. He added that the new agreement would prevent “major disruption to critical supply lines” and ensure “goods are moving quickly and efficiently across the country.”

These “critical supply lines” include shipping war materiel to Ukraine, Australia and Taiwan, among other countries. Since the outset of the US-NATO war against Russia last year, the ILWU has marched in lockstep with the Biden administration’s war plans by refusing to handle Russian cargo and by keeping workers on the job.

The US ruling class was terrified that a strike by West Coast dockworkers, either during the rail struggle last year, or while over 76,000 writers and actors are currently on strike, would undermine Washington’s war efforts and encourage a broader growth of the class struggle.

To prevent such an outcome, the Biden administration has two lines of defense: first, the bureaucratized and nationalist trade unions, and second, direct state intervention.

In his remarks Wednesday, Biden thanked his first-line defenders for services rendered to the capitalist state. After praising Adams and Su, Biden shifted to congratulate the Teamsters bureaucracy for forcing through a contract at UPS last month which the union claimed, under a cloud of suspicion from the rank and file, passed. Like the ILWU agreement, Biden characterized the Teamsters contract as “historic” and said that with the two agreements, “our supply chains will continue working the way they should.”

Pointing to the benefits the union apparatus provides for the employers as a labor police to block strikes and boost productivity, Biden said, “American union workers are the best in the world. They do their job a long time, long term, and *at less cost over time*. People are starting to understand that.”

“The wealthy,” Biden added, “do very well.”

The ILWU and Teamsters sellout contracts are just the latest in a series of contracts forced through since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

The day after the February 24, 2022 invasion, the United Steelworkers union, working with Biden, announced a tentative agreement to block a strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers, which USW President Tom Conway boasted “did not add to inflation pressures.” The agreement was announced less than 72 hours after Biden held a virtual meeting with Conway, other union bureaucrats and US government officials from the departments of Energy and Defense.

Later that same month in Canada, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) announced an arbitration agreement with

Canadian Pacific Railway (CP). Rank-and-file workers had no say over the terms of the agreement which ended a lockout of 3,000 workers and blocked them from going on strike.

Throughout the summer and into the winter, the Biden administration, working with the various railway unions, including the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED) and Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), both of which are under the Teamsters, made railroad workers continuously vote on tentative agreements they had already rejected. After the mid-term elections, a lame duck Congress, in robust bipartisan fashion, passed a bill banning railroad workers from striking, which was promptly signed Biden.

And in the last year, the Biden government has worked hand in glove with the Teamsters at UPS and the ILWU to block strikes. Most recently, he has intervened in the contract negotiations for 150,000 autoworkers at the Big Three (General Motors, Ford and Stellantis) which are set to expire next week. After issuing a statement last month calling on the companies and the UAW to come together and make a deal, Biden predicted earlier that there would not be a strike. “I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

In other words, since the start of the war, the administration has accelerated the drive to integrate the unions into the state apparatus in order to block strikes by these critical sections of the working class that are key to not only the US economy but the war overall. The maintenance of a war-time economy, which continues to impoverish workers and their families, while filling the coffers of defense contractors and bomb makers requires labor discipline on the “home front.”

If autoworkers and other sections of the working class are going to reverse the attacks on their lives and living standards and redirect society’s resources to the maintenance and preservation of human life, instead of its destruction for profit, workers must first take measure of who are their “friends” and who are their “enemies.” This begins with breaking the grip of the degenerated trade union bureaucracies and forming independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by militant workers, to take the conduct of their struggles out of the hands of corrupt bureaucrats.

It is through this rank-and-file rebellion that the working class, the only social force capable of putting a stop to war and the drive towards dictatorship, can unite workers across industrial and national boundaries.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact