

Contract expires next year for 45,000 dockworkers on the US East Coast

Erik Schreiber

12 November 2023

Harold Daggett, president of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), told union members at a conference last week to prepare for a strike if no new agreement with the employers is reached before the current contract expires on September 30, 2024. He repeated a previous assertion that the contract would not be extended.

These statements, coming almost a year before the contract expiration, reflect significant anxiety within the ILA leadership about how it will be able to control workers' anger. Daggett is attempting to control opposition by striking a militant pose and issuing threats that he does not intend to follow through with. As Willie Adams, president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), did on the West Coast, Daggett will work closely with President Joe Biden to try and violate the will of the membership, prevent a strike and impose a pro-company contract. The outcome will be determined by the extent to which workers are able to organize themselves in a rebellion against the corrupt union apparatus.

About 70,000 dockworkers are members of the ILA, both on the East Coast as well as the Great Lakes and Gulf of Mexico. The six-year contract that will expire next September covers 45,000 of those workers on the East Coast.

At last week's conference, Daggett proclaimed that the ILA would achieve "a landmark agreement." At a meeting in July, he warned that if the employers attempted to replace jobs with automation, they would "get a painful reminder that longshore workers brought these companies to where they are today." But the ILA's failure so far to make any specific demands for the contract reveals these statements to be mere bombast.

Daggett's own history speaks volumes about his true

orientation. In 1980, he was appointed secretary-treasurer and business agent of ILA Local 1804-1. Since then, he has continuously held positions of increasing importance in the ILA leadership. Daggett is now serving his fourth term as ILA president. Last year, he was paid \$638,439 in gross salary, which puts him in the top 1 percent of earners in the country. He represents a social layer that has nothing in common with the dockworkers whom he supposedly represents.

Daggett also appears to have more unsavory connections. A federal prosecutor, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Labor, and the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor filed an ongoing civil racketeering case against Daggett and three other top ILA officials in 2005. The lawsuit describes Daggett as a longtime associate of the Genovese crime family and alleges that he was placed in prominent union posts with the support of organized crime. It further alleges that Daggett and others conspired to award a lucrative ILA welfare benefit fund contract to a company affiliated with organized crime.

At a Waterfront Commission hearing in 2010, Daggett defended the salary of union shop steward Ralph Gigante, a nephew of the late Genovese family boss Vincent "Chin" Gigante. For working fewer than 30 hours per week, Gigante received \$400,000 in salary. Daggett claimed that this was "not a lot of money today."

Freight industry analysts believe that the ILA will seek a contract like the one that the ILWU imposed on its members on the West Coast earlier this year, after it had left workers on the job for a year past the expiration of the last contract. That rotten agreement provided a 32 percent wage increase over six years, which does not come close to overcoming the impact of inflation over the last three years and going forward.

The agreement also provided a one-time \$70 million “hero bonus” to workers for their labor during the pandemic. This bonus, which will be taxed, does not adequately compensate the dockworkers for the serious risks they faced during the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, it represents only a fraction of the billions of dollars in profits that the workers created for the companies through their labor.

The ILA has also said that it would seek contract language that guarantees its control at all the ports over which it has jurisdiction. It also will seek terms that enable it to establish itself at new terminals. But for the ILA bureaucracy, union “representation” means only ensuring itself a steady or increased stream of workers’ dues money.

The same considerations motivated the ILA’s current lawsuit against the United States Maritime Alliance and the shipping companies Hapag-Lloyd and OOCL. The lawsuit is a jurisdictional dispute about the Leatherman Terminal in the Port of Charleston, South Carolina. The ILA objects to the companies’ hiring of state employees, rather than ILA members, as lift-equipment operators. The ILA leadership is seeking \$300 million, and the issue is now before the US Supreme Court.

A strike at the East Coast ports would have serious economic implications. To avoid backlogs, many shippers have sent their goods to East Coast ports at the expense of those in the West. From July to September, the top East and Gulf Coast ports handled 51 percent of US containerized imports, and the top West Coast ports handled 49 percent, according to statistics cited in *FreightWaves*. In addition to Asian cargo, East and Gulf Coast ports handle significant volumes of cargo from Europe and South America. Almost all containerized imports from Europe are handled by East and Gulf Coast ports, according to the US Census Bureau.

The political implications of a strike would be at least as significant. A strike would interfere with the bipartisan policy of shipping weapons to Israel for its genocidal campaign in Gaza. It also would sabotage US military support for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and complicate plans for war with Iran and China. Furthermore, the outbreak of a dockworkers’ strike on the eve of the 2024 presidential election would be a major political embarrassment for Biden.

Biden will intervene to prevent such a strike, just as

he intervened in workers’ struggles on the West Coast docks, at the Big Three automakers, at UPS, and on the freight railroads. Like Teamsters President Sean O’Brien and United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, Daggett will act as Biden’s willing accomplice.

If dockworkers on the East Coast are to wage a genuine fight to preserve their jobs and win decent wages, they must take the initiative into their own hands. This will require them to form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the ILA leadership and of both pro-corporate parties. Now is the time for the workers to formulate demands and develop a strategy for winning them. The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist dockworkers in this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact