

As East Coast docks contract nears, maritime shippers and Biden administration rely on union bureaucrats to keep workers in line

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East coast dockworkers: Tell us what you're fighting for in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

As the September 30 contract expiration approaches for 45,000 east coast dockworkers, corporate and financial circles are reacting with increasing unease.

The contract is between the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) and the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) union on 36 ports. It includes the port of New York and New Jersey, the second biggest in the country. The ports on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts handle well over 100 million tons of cargo every year from Europe, South America and Asia, and this has only increased over the last several years as shipping companies redirected cargo ships from the West Coast while workers there were kept on the job without a contract for nearly a year.

A strike by East Coast dockworkers would have a tremendous impact, not only on the United States, but on the entire globe. It has the potential to rally millions of workers in critical industrial sectors in joint action against the austerity and the war plans of American imperialism and its allies in NATO.

Additionally, an October strike would come right in the middle of peak shipping season as retail and other companies prepare for holiday sales. Plans are being made to pull in stock a month earlier than usual, importing goods starting in June instead of July.

Maritime shippers are beginning to redirect cargo once again in anticipation of future slowdowns or shutdowns at East and Gulf Coast ports. Michael Aldwell, executive vice president for global transport and logistics company Kuehne + Nagel, told CNBC that the company is tracking a double-digit shift in cargo moving away from the East Coast of the US. Atwell stated, "As a result of these uncertainties, our customers are telling us they need options, and they need options before it's a necessity to try and grab capacity."

Mike Hatfield, senior manager of global logistics for packaging supplier Berlin Packaging, further explained the thinking of the multi-billion dollar maritime shipping companies:

"We learned [over the last four years] we are not tied down to

just going to the West Coast, East Coast, and support volume to other ports in the event the East Coast shuts down. We know we can go back into the West Coast and rail product, truck product cross country, so it's just making sure that we have diversity within our supply chain, within our partners, within our contracts for multiple routings of similar lanes."

The Port of Long Beach on the West Coast recently reported its fifth consecutive monthly volume increase. The port's executive director told CNBC that port officials are forecasting the annual volume trend to at least match the pre-pandemic number of 6.3 million twenty-foot equivalent (TEU) container units.

This strategy of whipsawing dockworkers from the eastern and western US against each other underlies the rapid development of ports on both coasts. This includes hundreds of millions of dollars spent on expanding operations at the Port of Savannah in Georgia. Shippers are working to ensure greater flexibility when faced with work stoppages or other sudden shocks, such as occurred in the opening stages of the pandemic when west coast ports were overwhelmed by traffic.

Last Friday, the largest container ship to ever visit America's east coast docked at the Port of Philadelphia. Measuring well nearly 1,300 feet long, the CMA CGM Marco Polo can carry over 16,000 TEUs. Port officials boasted that "this vessel is the manifestation of years of hard work preparing for this newer class of vessels...which have become the workhorse of maritime trade around the world."

Shipping companies have amped up preparations for disruptions at the ports following comments made by ILA President Harold Daggett that there would be no extension of the current contract. Daggett told dockworkers to prepare for a strike if no new agreement with the employers is reached before September 30.

Contract discussions between the ILA bureaucracy and the employers initially began in late 2022. Negotiations stalled about a year ago and remained in limbo until Daggett called for a resumption last month.

The militant pose being struck by Daggett and the ILA bureaucracy is nothing more than a masquerade. Daggett, a

wealthy corporate stooge and associate of the New York Mafia, has no intention of following through on his hollow threats. It reflects serious anxiety within the ILA bureaucracy over its ability to control the immense social anger boiling over among rank-and-file dockworkers.

Growing concerns among the maritime shippers and corporate/financial elite stem not from the ILA bureaucracy's blustering about strike action, but apprehension over the ability of the bureaucracy to maintain its stranglehold over the rank-and-file.

In a revealing comment, Lars Jensen, CEO of Vespucci Maritime said: "The risk [of a strike] is, of course, always there. But historically there has been more success in those negotiations than what you've seen with the ILWU on the West Coast. Peak season might start slightly earlier. Again, people might be concerned about the stability of the supply chains." The last strike called by the ILA, reluctantly, was in 1977, shut down after 44 days and the first non-wildcat strike on the East Coast docks in several decades.

Rank-and-File dockworkers face life-threatening working conditions and untenable living conditions in general.

The industry is notoriously dangerous due to strenuous workloads and intense work schedules. Dockworkers often work 6 hours on, 6 hours off, 7 days a week, resulting in constant fatigue. This, combined with poorly-maintained equipment due to cost cutting, results in frequent fatal accidents on the docks.

In 2022, a dockworker in Newark, New Jersey, was crushed to death when the straddle carrier he was operating turned over. Last year, a worker at the Port of Los Angeles fell 50 feet to his death from a crane.

The ILA bureaucrats are working day-and-night to cobble together a sellout contract that will avert a strike. To do so, they are taking a page out of the "Strike Ready" playbook used by the Teamsters bureaucracy under General President Sean O'Brien to strangle the struggle of UPS workers last year.

The Teamsters used empty threats of a national strike which it had no intention of calling to sell the contract it had already worked out as the product of a "credible strike threat." Now, the company is laying off over 12,000 workers nationwide, while the Teamsters bureaucracy has said virtually nothing.

In their struggle, not only are dockworkers up against the corporations and ILA bureaucracy, but the full force of the capitalist state. Ensuring the uninterrupted operation of the ports on both coasts is critical to the war plans of American imperialism.

The Biden administration views supply chains as critical for its expanding global war in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. At the end of last month, the administration announced a series of actions aimed at strengthening the cybersecurity of US ports. Tens of billions of dollars are being committed to build up port infrastructure and enhance port security, particularly targeting China, which is the largest supplier of cranes to ports in the US.

Within this context, Biden is relying heavily on the trade union bureaucracy to crush or limit strike action in essential sectors of the economy. In addition to UPS last year, this included the auto industry, where the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy under President Shawn Fain used its bogus "stand-up strike" last fall to keep the majority of auto production running before pushing through a sellout contract which has enabled mass layoffs this year.

On the West Coast, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) kept workers on the job without a contract for a year before finally ramming through a contract with below-inflation wages last summer. The White House was centrally involved in the talks before the contract expired, with acting Labor Secretary Julie Su particularly involved in securing the final contract.

Meanwhile, dockworkers, fed up with the endless delays, organized a series of wildcat job actions which significantly impacted port traffic along the West Coast. The ILA leadership forced their own members to scab on ILWU workers by handling cargo redirected from the West Coast docks.

At the end of 2022, when the railroad unions were unable to quash the growing wave of anger among railroad workers, the Biden administration and Congress stepped in and banned strike action in this key logistics sector, forcing on workers a contract they had already rejected.

On Tuesday, the American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA), representing more than 1,000 apparel and footwear brands, sent a letter to President Joe Biden urging the administration to "immediately engage" in the talks between the ILA and USMX. Some importers have publicly expressed their confidence that, especially in an election year, the Biden administration will step in to ensure a strike is averted.

Dockworkers must carefully study these past struggles and draw the correct lessons if they are to be successful in improving their lot against the machinations of the multi-billion-dollar maritime shipping companies and the capitalist state. This requires dockworkers to take the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of Daggett and the ILA bureaucracy and expand their fight by uniting with their brothers and sisters on the West Coast ports, the railroads, in logistics hubs and beyond through the formation of independent, democratically-controlled rank-and-file committees.



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