

Corporate America appeals to crisis-ridden Biden White House to block strike on East Coast docks

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Are you a dockworker? Tell us what your conditions are like and what you're fighting for in the next contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Around 150 trade groups, including the US Chamber of Commerce, sent an open letter to the Biden administration last Tuesday urging it to prevent a strike on the East Coast docks, where the contract for more than 40,000 workers expires at the end of September.

There is enormous opposition among dockworkers to onerous working conditions. In addition to speedup and safety issues, they are also facing the threat to their jobs from automation. As in virtually every industry, the ports are seeking to maximize profits and eliminate thousands of jobs through new advances in AI and automation. The weaponization of labor-saving technology, which could and should be used to ease the burden of work and improve workers' quality of life and living standards, is instead being used to accelerate a jobs massacre, which has already claimed around 1 million jobs in US-owned companies since the start of last year.

Fearing a rank-and-file rebellion, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has threatened to strike if a new contract is not in place by September 30. On June 10, the ILA canceled further talks with the US Maritime Alliance (USMX) after it was revealed that APM Terminals and Maersk are using automated systems to process trucks.

The letter from the corporate groups called on the Biden White House to "immediately work with both parties to resume contract negotiations and ensure there is no disruption to port operations and cargo fluidity."

Couching this in "national security" terms, the letter continues:

One of the key priorities for the administration has been supply chain resiliency and addressing ongoing supply chain challenges. We continue to see maritime supply chain challenges from the ongoing Houthi attacks on vessels transiting the Red Sea. This has led to other supply chain issues: congestion and lack of equipment at overseas ports, carrier capacity issues as they continue to divert vessels away from the Red Sea, and increased freight rates.

With all these existing challenges, the last thing the supply chain ... need[s] is a strike or other disruptions because of an ongoing labor negotiation. As this administration has seen, even the threat of a strike or disruption can have a negative impact on the supply chain.

The letter ends by calling for an agreement that would "ensure ... continued global competitiveness and that of the supply chain stakeholders"—in plain language, one which will ensure uninterrupted profits for US corporations.

Biden's program of corporatism

Notwithstanding the letter, there can be no doubt that the Biden administration is already deeply involved in the talks, as it has been in every contract negotiation in industries deemed critical by corporate interests and the national security apparatus to supply chains.

The White House has done so from the standpoint of protecting the profits of US capitalism from the threat of growing demands from the working class, as well as preparing the country for deeper involvement in the global wars, including Ukraine and Gaza, that American imperialism is fomenting.

Since taking office, Biden has presented himself as the most "pro-labor president in US history." What this really means is that he is relying heavily on the services of the union bureaucracy to block strikes and impose mass layoffs.

This was the case on the railroads in 2022. When workers voted down a contract backed by the White House, the railroad union bureaucrats delayed strike action for months, buying Biden and Congress the time they needed to pass a law to pre-emptively ban a strike and impose the rejected deal.

On the West Coast docks, which are covered by a separate contract under the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the intervention of the White House was noted for its unprecedented earliness and intensity. In 2022, in the weeks before the last contract expired, Biden spoke from the deck of a World War II-era battleship in the Port of Los Angeles to blame high inflation on Russia and China.

The ILWU kept workers on the job for more than a year after the last contract expired, while talks were held under total secrecy. When workers began to take matters into their own hands, conducting sickouts and work slowdowns, ILWU officials reacted by announcing a snap vote on a deal, written with the key involvement of acting Labor Secretary Julie Su.

In the auto industry, union elections in 2022 supervised by the Department of Labor were marred by vote suppression and resulted in

the installment of a new United Auto Workers president, Shawn Fain. Fain is a key Biden ally. They appeared on stage together to sell a new auto contract last fall, which is now being used to axe thousands of jobs. Meanwhile, Fain is a major campaigner for Biden's re-election and has tried to shield Biden from mass protests over his role in the Gaza genocide.

The fact that the ILA has felt compelled to threaten a strike is an indication of their fear that rank-and-file anger could easily spiral out of their control.

A real struggle requires a fight not only against USMX but the ILA bureaucracy and both corporate-controlled political parties. ILA President Harold Daggett is an alleged associate of the Genovese crime family and was paid \$855,261 in salary and disbursements in 2023, according to the union's filing with the US Labor Department. The ILA bureaucracy has spent decades enforcing sellouts, all the way back to infamous pro-company stooge Joseph P. Ryan in the early 20th century.

The ILA is following the playbook of the Teamsters at UPS, which threatened to strike if a deal was not in place before the old contract expired. In reality, the bureaucracy had no intention of calling a strike and violated their own pledge to do so.

The Teamsters so-called "strike-ready campaign" was designed to market, as the product of a "credible strike threat," a contract which is now being used to lay off more than 12,000 salaried and warehouse workers, close 200 facilities, and "automate everything," in the words of UPS CEO Carole Tomé. The company also cited labor "certainty" provided by the contract as key to implementing its so-called "Network of the Future."

The only organization which sought to oppose this sellout from the standpoint of a struggle against the bureaucracy was the UPS Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which warned at every step what the Teamsters officials were doing and elaborated a program of action on which workers could fight. The UPSWRFC is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which includes worker-controlled committees all over the world, including in the auto industry, the railroads and other workplaces where capitalist governments have intervened against workers.

Favorable conditions for struggle against Biden, union bureaucrats

The reference in the open letter to "supply chain challenges" shows just how strategically significant the East Coast docks struggle is, not just for US capitalism but for the working class. US corporations, already dealing with sharp increases in shipping costs due to pandemic and war-related supply chain issues, can ill-afford a disruption which would bring their global operations to a halt.

Control over supply chains are central to the US policy of global war. The ports are critical to moving weapons and materiel overseas to battlefields in Ukraine, the Middle East and Asia.

A strike on the docks would have a galvanizing effect on workers not just in the United States but across the world, where workers are facing the same attacks. Moreover, it would seriously challenge the criminal war policies of the White House. The trade union bureaucrats, joined at the hip with the government, have completely ignored the call by the Palestinian trade unions for industrial action to

halt the shipment of weapons to Israel.

But there is growing support all over the world for such measures. Protests have been held on West Coast ports against vessels carrying Israeli weapons, and workers across Europe and Asia have refused to load ships bound for Israel. Recently, Turkish airport workers refused to refuel an Israeli commercial jet after it made an emergency landing.

The ruling class is relying heavily on state intervention, either through open injunction or by working through union intermediaries, to prevent a strike. But the talks are unfolding under a deep crisis of the Biden administration. Following the disastrous debate performance last week, which revealed the clear mental decline of the 81-year-old president, it is increasingly likely that Biden may not be the candidate in November, or perhaps not even president by the time the contract expires.

A related crisis is opening up in the union bureaucracy. In June, a federal monitor announced he was investigating corruption charges against Fain and other top UAW officials. A federal judge also ruled in favor of the lawsuit by Will Lehman, a socialist autoworker who ran against Fain for president, against the Department of Labor, alleging capricious and arbitrary dismissal of Lehman's serious complaints about the integrity of the union election.

As for the Teamsters, the bureaucracy is openly aligning with Trump, and union General President Sean O'Brien will speak at the Republican National Convention this month. This exposes the right-wing and fascist outlook, which is common to the whole union bureaucracy.

This crisis creates conditions favorable for a rebellion by the rank and file. Workers must oppose the union-government-management conspiracy on the docks by enforcing workers control over bargaining, based on red lines decided on by workers themselves. Workers must organize into independent rank-and-file committees to enforce a strike by October 1, if a contract is not in place which prevents layoffs and meets their demands.

Such a struggle requires that workers intervene completely independently of the two-party system and the union bureaucracy. Whatever happens over the next several months, the working class will confront the necessity of waging a determined struggle against the union apparatus and the corporate and political establishment, which it serves.



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