

Dockworker union issues 60-day strike notice ahead of potential walkouts on US East Coast

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Are you an East Coast dockworker? Tell us what you're demanding in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Last week, the International Longshoremen's Association provided a legally-required 60-day strike notice ahead of the expiration of the East Coast dockworkers' contract at the end of September. More than 40,000 port workers are pressing for strike action against the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) on October 1 if their demands are not met.

A strike by East Coast dockworkers would have a colossal impact not only on the profits of the major maritime shipping companies, but, most significantly, on the entire global capitalist economy. The contract covers 36 ports on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of the United States, including the port of New York and New Jersey, the second biggest in the country.

The Atlantic and Gulf ports handle over 100 million tons of cargo every year from Europe, South America and Asia. Unimpeded operation of the ports is paramount for the profits of major American and transnational corporations, as well as for the shipments of weapons to Israel, Ukraine and other US proxy forces.

Among rank-and-file dockworkers, there is broad opposition to forced work speedup, increased working hours and the decline of basic safety measures. Thousands of dockworkers also face the loss of their jobs to automation, as the ports seek to use labor-saving technologies as a weapon against workers.

But East Coast dockworkers have immense leverage to win their demands. A strike would not only bring whole sections of the economy to a halt, it would also embolden workers across the country and the world to press for their own demands and become the start of a broader offensive by the working class.

The ILA bureaucracy is maneuvering to get out in front of this. For months, it has threatened to strike if a new deal is not in place by the time the old one expires.

But the critical question dockworkers face is enforcing democratic control over their struggle. The last 45 years has seen not one strike on the East Coast docks despite vicious cuts. The ILA bureaucrats, steeped in decades of sellouts, are following the playbook of the Teamsters bureaucrats last year at UPS.

There, officials used a "strike ready campaign" to lend credibility to a deal it already had worked out, and which is now being used to lay off tens of thousands of UPS workers under the new, automated "Network of the Future."

Dockworkers must be on guard against a similar 11th hour surprise deal. They must form rank-and-file committees, composed of trusted workers, to give them the ability to countermand a betrayal. This will also put them in the best position to answer any attempt by the government to ban a strike, as Congress and Biden did to the railroaders in 2022, and as the White House did to the West Coast dockworkers last year.

The port operators are nervous that the ILA bureaucracy will be unable to control the ranks and avoid a strike. According to the National Retail Federation (NRF), monthly inbound cargo volume at major US container ports is expected to hit record levels, as major retail companies expedite shipments in anticipation of a strike on the East and Gulf Coast docks.

Jonathan Gold, NRF Vice President for Supply Chain and Customs Policy, said "Many retailers have taken precautions, including earlier shipping and shifting cargo to West Coast ports." On the potential disruption of global supply chains caused by a strike, Gold continued, "This comes on top of ongoing disruption

issues, including attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea. Vessel diversions have led to increased shipping times and costs, as well as equipment shortages and congestion in Asian ports.”

Christian Roeloffs, co-founder and CEO of equipment visibility platform Container xChange, told the Journal of Commerce, “Retailers have been preparing for the peak season since early 2024, aiming to avoid stock shortages, and now that we’re entering this busy period, the focus will be on understanding the true demand dynamics.”

The NRF’s Global Port Tracker report shows that U.S. ports handled 2.16 million TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units) in June of this year, a 3.6 percent increase from May and up 17.7 percent year over year. This brings volumes for the first half of 2024 to 12.1 million TEU, up 15 percent from 2023.

The Global Port Tracker projects that volume will have surged to 2.34 million TEU in July and will remain the same in August, the highest levels since the record of 2.4 million TEU in May of 2022, when shipping companies were still working through backlogs caused by the early phase of the pandemic. Further increases in TEU volumes are projected for the rest of the year, significantly higher than 2023.

A strike would shut down 6 of the 10 busiest ports in the US. According to Maersk, “a one-week shutdown could take 4-6 weeks to recover from, with significant backlogs and delays compounding with each passing day.”

Over the last several years, the major maritime shippers have raked in tens of billions of dollars. In May, the container shipping industry reported profits of \$5.4 billion for the first quarter of 2024.

Corporate America, as it did at UPS, on the railroads and on the West Coast docks, is appealing to the Biden administration to directly intervene to prevent a strike. But there can be no doubt that, behind the scenes, the White House is already intimately involved, as they have in every major contract over the past four years. In particular, the administration wants to avoid a strike weeks before the US presidential elections and, above all, ensure no interruptions to the supply of weapons to US-backed wars abroad.

In a revealing comment, Maersk CEO Vincent Clerc told analysts during Maersk’s second-quarter earnings call, “I look at the likelihood of having strong industrial

action as in strike as being highly unlikely.” He continued, “It is our expectation that when the contract expires in September there may be some extension of the contract as there is a lot that still needs to be negotiated.” In fact, an extension is exactly what the Teamsters agreed to last year at UPS.

Workers must use the time they have between now and the end of September to organize themselves for a three-front war against USMX, the White House and the ILA bureaucrats. The enemies which workers face are powerful, but the working class, the source of the world’s wealth, is more powerful.



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