

# As US East Coast dockworkers face contract deadline, union, government and management draw from playbook of sellouts at UPS, rail

Tom Hall  
3 September 2024

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

The contract for 45,000 dockworkers across the US East Coast is set to expire at the end of September, threatening a strike which would deal a serious blow to US and global capitalism.

Workers are determined to win their demands. A key issue is the introduction of new automated technologies on the ports which would be used to further slash jobs.

A recent *New York Times* article laid out some of what is already in place at the Port of Norfolk, Virginia:

- Manned vehicles, called shuttle carriers, transport [shipping] containers a short distance to the base of a giant stack of containers.

- Once containers are on the stack, however, many large, rail-mounted cranes shaped like upside-down U's work nonstop to sort the containers. This task does not require human operators.

- Later, a person in a control center works these cranes to take containers off their stacks and place them onto waiting trucks.

Workers are also fighting against low wages. Workers at the Port of New York/New Jersey make 55 percent of what dockworkers on the West Coast make, according to *Labor Notes*, and dockworkers in Virginia make only half of that. These figures, however, do not count the thousands of casuals who work as day laborers on the West Coast, with no contractual rights.

Faced with huge pent-up anger, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has promised to strike if a new deal is not in place by the time the current one expires on September 30. Officially, talks have not taken place in weeks, having been broken off over the use of automated truck gates at the Port of Mobile in Alabama.

However, the ILA bureaucrats have no intention of waging a struggle, and their talk of a strike is a maneuver to get out in front of the workers.

If there is to be a fight, it must be waged by rank-and-file dockworkers against both the port operators, the corrupt union bureaucracy and the federal government, which is waiting in

the wings to block a strike if necessary.

For all of the public threats to strike, the ILA has not yet even called a strike vote, although it has filed a 60-day strike notice, a legal requirement for strike action.

Last year, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on the West Coast docks imposed a contract in a snap vote, after keeping workers on the job without a contract for more than a year. The contract, worked out in close collaboration with the US Department of Labor and acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, was sprung on workers after they began carrying out wildcat actions in defiance of the bureaucracy.

The ILA is just as much an entity of the corporations and the government as its West Coast counterpart. In addition, the ILA bureaucracy is long believed to have ties with organized crime.

While the White House has kept a studied silence on the East Coast talks, there can be no doubt that it is heavily involved behind the scenes. On the West Coast, negotiators pointed to the "unprecedented" involvement of the White House before talks even officially began. In the summer of 2022, shortly before the previous contract expired, Biden stood on the deck of a World War II battleship in the Port of Los Angeles and signaled that the White House sees the operation of the docks as a key "national security" issue.

## Lessons of UPS

The ILA's sudden decision to break off talks over the summer is nothing but theatrics. In reality, talks began as early as 2022 and were already well-advanced when union leaders said they broke down. The use of automated truck gates at the Port of Mobile, while a serious issue, has been in place for years, undoubtedly with the knowledge of the union bureaucracy.

On Wednesday, the ILA began its Wage Scale Meetings in New Jersey. It is likely angling to have a deal announced by the

eleventh hour or even sooner.

The ILA is following a playbook, which was established last year by the Teamsters union at UPS. The union bureaucracy, under new General President Sean O'Brien, made a show of "contentious" talks through a series of carefully scripted maneuvers, including threatening to strike without a new deal and walking out of the talks. At the same time, as in the ILA, the Teamsters officials never made any real preparations for a strike by its 340,000 members at UPS.

In the end, the Teamsters sprang a deal on workers after the last second. (The bureaucrats allowed their self-imposed deadline to expire without calling a strike.) They used theatrics to market a deal which was already worked out in advance as the product of a "credible strike threat."

That contract is now being used to slash jobs and automate "everything," in the words of UPS executives. Around 200 facilities are slated to be closed or automated, 12,000 cuts to white collar positions have been announced and sort shifts around the country have been eliminated. The overall size of the UPS workforce has already plunged by tens of thousands, with many more on the way.

In comments to the press, UPS CEO Carol Tomé called the "certainty" provided by the Teamsters contract as key to the company's automation drive.

The International Association of Machinists is carrying out a similar stunt at Boeing. Having publicly "threatened" to call a strike by September 12 of 33,000 workers at factories in the state of Washington and Oregon, in reality, the IAM has already scheduled a vote that day on a contract which officially does not yet exist.

## Government intervention

ILA statements calling for the government to "stay out" of talks cannot be taken seriously. In reality, there can be no doubt that the Biden-Harris administration is already deeply involved, as it has in every major national contract over the past four years. Biden, the so-called most "pro-labor president in American history," is using the union bureaucrats to impose labor discipline and keep workers under control.

If that fails, they are prepared to use more open methods of state repression. This was the case on the railroads in 2022. When workers rejected a sellout deal brokered by government mediators, the White House and both parties in Congress closed ranks to impose the deal and pre-emptively blocked a strike.

Now, the rail unions are attempting to quietly push through new five-year deals that are even worse than the one enforced by Congress, in order to prevent the emergence of a rank-and-file rebellion.

The White House and Transportation Secretary Pete

Buttigieg, in particular, also reportedly intervened directly in the lockout last month of Canadian railroaders to urge the government of Justin Trudeau to impose binding arbitration.

Over the past several days, worried headlines have appeared in the corporate press about the potential "disruption" from an East Coast dock strike. Alan Murphy of Sea-Intelligence estimates that even a two-week strike would cause shipping delays into 2025.

Many companies have already pre-emptively begun moving shipments to West Coast docks. The system of staggered contracts between the coasts is one of the ways in which workers are divided and whipsawed against each other.

However, many analysts have downplayed the likelihood that a strike will take place, citing the fact that the White House would almost certainly intervene with an injunction under the Taft-Hartley Act. This took place during the last dockworkers strike in 2002 under Republican President George W. Bush.

If there is to be a real struggle, workers must take matters into their own hands. They need to draw the lessons of the railroads, UPS and others, where workers formed rank-and-file committees to fight against both management and the union bureaucracy. Only by mobilizing themselves independently of the apparatus can they put themselves in the best possible position to answer any threats by the White House.

Fresh proof of the need for a rebellion against the union bureaucracy has been provided by the recent strike of Dakota auto parts workers, who organized a committee to fight against the sabotage by the United Auto Workers, which forced them to vote five times on the same deal.

The international unity of the working class is also a key strategic question. In the event of a strike, a decisive question will also be the refusal of West Coast dockworkers to handle scab shipments. But that will also require that workers from both sides of the country unite in a common struggle against the government-controlled bureaucrats in both unions. Workers must also link up with dockworkers across North America, as well as railroaders, Boeing workers, teachers and other key sections of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**