

East Coast dockworkers demand higher pay, protection from automation

“The company is getting more per man than ever in its history”

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With only two weeks remaining before their current contract expires, dockworkers at the Port of New York and New Jersey spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, under promise of anonymity, about their demands. They also described the grueling and dangerous conditions in which they work.

The contract for 45,000 dockworkers across the US East Coast expires at the end of September. A strike at East Coast ports would have a major impact, not only on the US economy, but on US military operations and logistics around the world.

At the same time, workers are determined to fight over key issues such as the introduction of new automated technologies on the ports which would be used to further slash jobs.

In a statement issued September 7, President Harold Daggett and Executive Vice President Dennis Daggett of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) made empty denunciations of “corporate greed” and employer “propaganda.” Significantly the word “strike” never appears in the statement. This omission is not accidental; the ILA is preparing to impose a rotten deal on its members. To fight and win what they need, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on dockworkers to take the initiative by forming a rank-and-file committee independent of the ILA apparatus.

One dockworker told the WSWS that he and his coworkers want “fair raises” that include cost-of-living adjustments and protection from inflation. Referring to claims in the media that dockworkers are well paid and should be satisfied with what they have, he countered that like other workers, dockworkers struggle to keep up with rising costs. “I work so many hours now,” he said. “I am only keeping even, what with mortgage and college payments.”

Improvements in retirement benefits are another major demand. A dockworker explained that the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) previously had increased the annuity that it provided to him and his coworkers. But such an increase is another type of raise, rather than an improvement to the pension, the worker explained.

“Automation in jobs is the big issue,” said another port worker. “All workers face it,” he added, citing employees in grocery stores as an example.

One dockworker estimated that one-quarter of the business at the port where he works is automated. The terminal operators use automation to achieve higher levels of productivity that become the new standards that workers are expected to meet. Management thus uses automation not to improve conditions for the workers, but to push them harder. “The company is getting more per man than ever in its history,” said the dockworker.

The terminal operators are introducing automation stealthily, another dockworker said. Maher Terminals in Elizabeth, New Jersey, bought 150 new straddle carriers, which are vehicles that carry freight and can be loaded and unloaded without the need for cranes or forklifts. For now, workers operate the straddle carriers at Maher Terminals, but the vehicles can be modified easily to become fully automated, the dockworker explained.

Another worker pointed to a related problem. “We are understaffed here. That is because they keep the ports under the Waterfront Commission control, which is for the companies, even though there is no more mob (organized crime) in the ports.”

The dockworkers also described the punishing conditions in which they work. Management expects them to be available 24 hours per day, seven days per week. During a “shape-up” process, workers are chosen by seniority for shifts on the following day.

The requirement of constant availability restricts the workers' personal lives, making it difficult for them to be married and take care of their children. "Your life is turned upside-down. Guys work around the clock," said one dockworker.

"We miss a lot of family time: plays, dances, holidays," another worker agreed. "We are supposed to have four nonworking holidays, but even then, we are supposed to be available to 'shape.'" Workers cannot simply take a day off, nor can they get a second job if necessary. One dockworker confirmed that work weeks of as long as 100 hours are not unheard of.

Moreover, a dockworker's job is more dangerous than that of a policeman or firefighter, but this fact is not widely known, according to one worker. "The rate of accidents is extremely high," he said.

"We start work at \$20 per hour and we risk our lives," another dockworker stated. "New people at McDonald's can get more."

Another said, "What bothers me the most is the way companies boast about their profits." At the same time, the companies hide the data about these profits when it is convenient for them to do so. "We sacrifice a lot," the worker added, noting that dockworkers stayed on the job during the dangerous early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when no vaccines were available.

The dockworkers recognize that their crucial position in the US economy gives them tremendous influence. One remarked that a successful fight on the East Coast docks could set a standard for other workers. Indeed, a militant strike on the docks could galvanize workers in every industry and in every country.

A reporter for the WSWS explained that the dockworkers are facing not only USMX, but also the US government. He cited the joint action between President Joe Biden and both parties in Congress that illegalized a strike by freight railroad workers in 2022 and imposed a pro-company agreement on them. One worker replied emphatically, "They are not doing that to the dockers. We won't let them."

But the crucial lesson for the East Coast dockworkers is that the third party in the conspiracy against railroad workers, in addition to the companies and the US government, was the trade unions. Defying near-unanimous strike votes, the leaders of the railroad unions enforced the antiworker Railway Labor Act and kept their members on the job. The bureaucrats deliberately misled rail workers by urging them to have faith in the Democrats and in the excruciatingly drawn-out mediation

process established by law. Even when this process had been exhausted, and rail workers were legally allowed to strike, the unions kept them on the job and enabled Biden and Congress to enforce a sellout contract that workers had already rejected. This naked betrayal sparked widespread anger among workers.

The East Coast dockworkers can have no doubt that behind the scenes the Biden administration is already intervening in their struggle because of the docks' centrality to the US economy, their importance for the bipartisan agenda of world war and the looming presidential election.

ILA President Daggett has alternately dared Biden to invoke the Taft-Hartley Act to prevent a strike and downplayed the danger that he would do so. Should Biden invoke Taft-Hartley, Daggett would dutifully enforce it, just as President Willie Adams of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union cooperated with Biden to keep West Coast dockworkers on the job without a contract for a year. Adams' betrayal protected corporate and financial profits and prevented what could have been a powerful strike.

The East Coast dockworkers must learn the lessons of the West Coast docks and the freight railroads. To prevent a new betrayal, they must form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the trade unions and of both capitalist political parties. Only by taking the fight into their own hands and by waging the broadest possible struggle can workers win their fight. This involves reaching out to other sections of the working class coming into struggle such as Boeing workers and railroad workers, who face new contract expirations later this year as well as brother dockworkers in Canada and around the world. Only in this way can East Coast dockworkers put themselves in the best position to confront the all-but-certain intervention of the Biden administration.



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