

“We want fair wages, not automation to put us out of work,” says striking dockworker

Our reporters
1 October 2024

Dockworkers: Tell us what you're fighting for by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Tuesday was the first day of the walkout by 45,000 workers at 36 ports from Maine to Texas. The leaders of the International Longshore Association were forced to call a strike, the first on the East and Gulf coast ports since 1977, when it became clear rank-and-file workers would not back off from their demands for inflation-busting pay increases and protections against the use of automation by the shipping and port owners to eliminate their jobs.

Although the ILA bureaucracy sought to enforce a gag order on striking workers, several spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* who visited picket lines in New Jersey, Virginia and Maryland Tuesday.

“We are on strike for the union to negotiate a better contract,” a dockworker in Port Newark, New Jersey, said. “The main thing is automation. I have worked on the docks for nineteen years and I operate a straddle carrier. Working one hundred hours a week is typical, but I work seventy-five hours a week. When they brought in automation in the West Coast, the straddle carrier lost 800 to 1000 jobs. I think automation is going to happen, but we want to protect our jobs.”

A co-worker added, “There are fully automated ports in Europe.”

Another worker, holding up his sign and drawing honks of support from passing vehicles, said, “Fair wages and no automation is what we want. It puts men out of work. We have to work around the clock, and it is a dangerous job because there is nothing but heavy equipment driving around you. People have been hospitalized and killed.

“Five or six were killed in the thirty years since I

started work here. We sacrifice our lives. Our life is coming to the job. We just want a fair contract. There would be no strike if the companies agreed to this. The companies are raking in billions and the CEOs are making tens of millions. They can say what they want, that they will not automate, but we know they will automate if not stopped.”

A Port Newark crane operator with 23 years explained workers were not paid enough for the non-stop work they do. “When COVID hit, we worked seven months straight before we had off. This went on for three years. I get off a little and then have to go back. We need benefits for when we retire. If I drop dead, they won't even give my wife my pension unless I have signed a form.”

Another Port Newark docker who worked as a checker said the companies were using “the carrot and the stick.” He continued, “They will pay us the money but eventually force us out over time. Our industry here in New York and New Jersey used to have 50,000 workers but with containerization thousands have lost their jobs.

“The international shipping companies dictate the conditions. At every chance, they raise the price of containers, but they are not passing their profits on to us. We end up paying the inflated prices. We are a benchmark for industry, for what Boeing will do to its striking workers. Our last contract focused on benefits. Now we can focus on our jobs. It took me six years to get to forty dollars per hour. We start at \$20.

“We don't want seventy-five cents more and then find they moved in automation to cut jobs. The media says our demand for a 77 percent across-the-board raise is a lot, but over six years, starting at \$20 per hour, that is really not much.”

He continued, “This is not just about pay. They try to

control our hours. To protect jobs, we should have a guaranteed number of manpower hours annually. What happens to our hours with automation? I average one hundred hours a week, seven days each week. It is a way of life.

“When COVID first hit, Biden spoke to ILA President Daggett who said we would do what was necessary for the nation. Not a single worker stayed home. People took COVID home to our families and loved ones died. It is a dangerous job. This last year we lost co-workers on a straddle. It is a demanding job, and it takes a toll on our home life.”

The worker continued, “It is a good union job. Some here are third and fourth generation dockworkers. But the companies tried to put in automation at Sealand (Florida) and Atlanta, while they were supposed to be negotiating. To stand in solidarity, workers should not be allowing ships to the West Coast. They have fully automated Port Rotterdam and most of South America.

“Five billion dollars a day is being lost during the strike and the mid-size companies are calling Biden up to get this settled. The politicians are all in the pockets of big business,” he said.

The worker concluded, “I have fifteen years left. But what about the generations after me? My job as a checker would be the first one to go. I sit on the bottom of a crane and keep a record of the truck containers. There is already semi-automation. Half the time the automatic tickets for trucks coming in our gates are inaccurate, yet they want to automate. The truckers have to wait three hours.”

At a large picket at nearby Port Elizabeth, a newer heavy equipment mechanic, explained the long hours exist because there is a shortage of workers, as there is in many industries. “The companies dictate the hours and how many employees they hire.”

Asked how he feels about workers who must work 75 hours or more, he laughed and responded, “Only 75 hours would be good. Automation will take jobs, but automation can have problems. The port computers were hacked a couple of years ago and the port was messed up for a week. AI is also spreading, and they had the actors strike. You know, they could use AI to replace CEO’s, too.”

Asked how he felt about the US elections and the wars, the mechanic stated, “A lot of guys here are for Trump but there is no choice in the election. All the

politicians suck. The union has a clause to let military equipment be loaded. In Bayonne, they are still working those military ships. Russia invaded Ukraine but NATO had moved up on Russia. It does look like world war, and I don’t like it.

“This fight is worldwide. Canadian ports voted to go on strike. The government stepped in on the West Coast. But if government steps in with a Taft-Hartley (back-to-work order) we will do what we have to do.”

At the Norfolk International Terminal in Virginia, workers expressed support for the striking Boeing workers, and one said that his brother worked for Stellantis in Detroit, which is slashing thousands of jobs. Another worker, expressing her opposition to job cuts, said, “Who is going to be left? Who will actually have a job with all of this automation?”

At the Dundalk Marine Terminal in Baltimore, Maryland workers also said dockworkers and Boeing workers should unite. A striker, who works for a company that ships military equipment, thought that it “made no sense” to allow shipments to continue during the strike, but the ILA leadership had okayed it. Whenever a weapons shipment arrives, he is obligated to wind up his picket duty and report to work. He told reporters that he believed this was primarily due to the war in Ukraine.

WSWS reporters also spoke with two postal workers who joined the dockworkers’ picket lines. The US Postal Service is also using automation to slash jobs.

“I’m in the American Postal Workers Union and we’re trying to educate the public about the layoffs going on right now and the short-staffing of windows,” one worker said. “We want to go back to the 2012 standards where we had overnight deliveries for almost every city in the US.”

His co-worker added, “The dockworkers strike is a serious business and people got to understand that. Corporate America, all they’re doing is padding their pockets daily, and every second it’s coming off the backs of the laborers.”



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