

Longshore job actions spread to largest Canadian seaports in BC and Montreal

Carl Bronski

4 November 2024

Strikes and lockouts involving workers at Canada's largest ports in Montreal and British Columbia are set to significantly curtail seaborne cargo traffic into and out of the country.

On Monday the BC Maritime Employers Association announced as of 4:30 p.m. local time it was locking out the more than 700 foremen who oversee the loading and unloading of cargo at the ports of Vancouver and Prince Rupert. The lockout will effectively shut down Canada's West Coast docks—save for grain terminals and cruise ships—for the second time in less than a year, as the foremen are essential for operations.

The employer's provocative action came after International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 514 announced it had implemented an overtime ban and that foremen would also refuse to adopt technological changes, as part of a "limited job action" following a 72-hour strike notice issued on Thursday.

Meanwhile, at the Port of Montreal more than 300 dockworkers at two terminals have been on an indefinite strike since last Thursday. Their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has kept 900 workers on the job, maintaining operations at the rest of the port. Some 80 members of the same union at Quebec City's port have entered the third year of a lockout, which CUPE is helping enforce by isolating the workers.

The contract struggles by foremen at the Pacific seaports and by dockworkers at the Port of Montreal follow on from massive worker unrest last year in BC that saw a militant 13-day strike by 7,400 longshoremen sold out by ILWU officials in collaboration with the trade union-backed Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The Liberal government has worked closely with the Biden administration in the US to suppress the class struggle on a North America-wide basis, including during last year's dockworkers struggle and this year's lockout/strike at Canada's two main freight rail carriers.

In the United States last month, 45,000 longshore workers in 36 ports from Maine to Texas struck for three days in the face of opposition from the Biden administration, big business and state governments. Quickly acceding to demands to wrap up the strike to ensure the flow of weapons to the US-led war on Russia and Israel's genocide against the Palestinians, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) union bureaucracy scuttled the strike even though the full contract had not yet been negotiated.

In the current contract struggle in Montreal, after staging a 24-hour strike on October 27, longshore workers at the Port of

Montreal immediately convened at their union hall and voted to indefinitely continue the walkout at the Viau and Maisonneuve container terminals in the port beginning on October 31. The two docks are owned by cargo company Termont, and employ 320 of the 1,200 longshore workers currently in a drawn-out contract dispute at the port. The two terminals account for about 40 percent of container traffic in the Port of Montreal and 15 percent of all types of cargo moved at the port.

The walkout follows on from an open-ended overtime ban on the docks and a partial three-day strike at the port last month. The 1,200 longshoremen have been without a contract since December 31, 2023.

Workers struck the Termont terminals to press their demands for revision of the company's brutal work-scheduling practices, which make it virtually impossible for workers to enjoy any real work-life balance. Termont is the most notorious of the cargo companies in its constant and provocative altering of already onerous shift scheduling. In response to the strike, management has threatened to void the 320 workers' salary guarantee provisions on November 5.

All 1,200 workers at the port are demanding not only improved work schedules but a wage rise of 20 percent over four years to bring them into parity with longshore workers in Halifax and Vancouver. The Port of Montreal is the second largest in Canada after the operations in Vancouver.

Anti-worker federal government strikebreaking threats and pro-company Labour Code edicts designed to enforce the brutal contract demands of the shipping and logistics companies have been deployed against St. Lawrence Seaway workers, as well as west coast dockers. Already, due to a July decision of the Canadian Industrial Relations Board, Montreal longshore workers involved in any industrial action at the port cannot interfere with grain shipments or cargo destined for the island province of Newfoundland.

A five-day strike in 2021 at the Port of Montreal was criminalized by the trade union-backed Trudeau Liberal government, with workers forced into pro-company binding arbitration. A bitter 12-day strike in August 2020 preceded another government-imposed strike ban.

In each case, CUPE officials have bowed to the attacks of the government and the employers, working tirelessly to restrain the workers. In the current Montreal dispute, the CUPE leadership has repeatedly refused to call an all-out indefinite strike, in spite of

overwhelming support from the rank and file.

Late last week, Jasmin Guenette, the national vice president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, demanded government intervention to break the strike actions. “It’s time the federal government made ports an essential service, so that they remain operational at all times,” he said.

In British Columbia, after a simmering contract dispute beginning last May, the dock foremen have already seen government officials move to stop any strike action. The workers are fighting to turn back demands to lower existing staffing levels and beat back company attempts at unilaterally imposing changes to work processes through increased automation. In particular, the largest of the cargo handling companies, DP World, has refused outright to withdraw its plans to force new automation on the workers.

Dock foremen have been clamoring for strike action since an initial strike vote was taken this past June. When a 72-hour strike notice was issued in early July to bring operations at DP World to a halt, the employers association threatened to lock out all port foremen across the industry if workers took strike action.

However, after an intervention by the federal labour minister just days before the strike was to begin, the CIRB announced that they had determined the 99 percent June strike vote was an “unfair labour practice” and therefore illegal because, they claimed, not all union foremen had the opportunity to vote. In reality, the ILWU had declared it had no dispute with the other companies operating on the docks and therefore sought to limit job action to only the foremen working at DP World.

Appeals against the CIRB ruling dragged out any action on the docks for another month before a second vote could be organized. That 96 percent vote to strike announced in August was mandated by all union foremen voting across the entire industry. Despite the near unanimous support for strike action, however, ILWU officials have yet to honour the vote by calling for an all-out strike and have now allowed the employers association to take the initiative with its lockout.

With the entire cargo-handling operation along the Pacific Coast now shut down, the employers have calculated that the federal government will more easily cite the supposed “dire threats to the Canadian economy” to legalize further worker action.

Business leaders across the country, in concert with provincial and federal government officials, have been demanding a declaration outlawing all strikes at ports and railways in the wake of militant job actions by workers over the past several years. In July, the government intervened in a WestJet airline mechanics strike to end the action and finalize a contract before binding arbitration could be imposed. And the federal Liberal government and the CIRB intervened in August to end a lockout/strike on the two major Canadian railway networks—Canadian Pacific Kansas City and Canadian National—and force workers into the always company-friendly binding arbitration process.

Union bureaucrats are working overtime with their allies in government to suppress the class struggle, but it is continuing to intensify. A turn by Montreal dockworkers or west coast foremen to broader sections of the working class to join their fight for improvements to wages and conditions would meet with

enthusiastic support. A national postal workers’ strike recently mandated by a 96 percent vote by the 55,000-strong Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) membership is imminent, although the CUPW bureaucrats are doing their best to avert it. CUPW has kept workers on the job past a November 3 strike deadline in a no strike/no lockout agreement with management.

The litany of union betrayals is not the fruit of a few rotten apples atop the union apparatuses but of the pro-capitalist perspective shared by, and embodied in, the union bureaucracy as a whole. The unions and the privileged bureaucrats who run them, in Canada as around the world, function today as instruments of big business and the state and have developed class interests hostile to the workers they claim to represent. This finds expression in the Liberal/union/New Democratic Party alliance, which has supported a massive military build-up, Canadian imperialism’s involvement in wars around the world, and attacks on workers at home over the past nine years.

However, increasingly favourable conditions exist for dockworkers on the west coast and in Montreal to defeat these conspiracies if they make their struggles the spearhead of a worker-led counter-offensive. The more than 7,000-strong workforce across Canada’s west coast docks would welcome a powerful appeal from the foremen for solidarity action to beat back the looming government intervention, with their own defeat at the hands of the Liberals last year still fresh in their memories. Across the border, west coast dockers in the US remember only too well the ILWU’s connivance with the Biden administration to prevent them from striking after their contract expired in 2023, above all so that they wouldn’t go out alongside their Canadian brothers and sisters. The ILWU then rammed another concessions-filled contract down their throats.

Canadian and US ports play a critical role in the North American imperialist powers’ global supply chain, therefore necessitating cross-border collaboration by dockworkers in a political struggle against austerity and war. Workers must mobilize to defend their social and democratic rights on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

To carry out this fight, workers must build independent organs of class struggle, rank-and-file committees in all workplaces, and prepare a working class offensive against the profit system, which is at the root of war, social inequality and the growing attacks on democratic rights.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact