

Employer lockouts close Canada's largest container ports in Montreal and British Columbia

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11 November 2024

The Maritime Employers Association (MEA) locked out some 1,200 longshoremen at the Port of Montreal Sunday after the workers rejected by 99.7 percent the operators' "final offer," which it proclaimed last Thursday. This was the third time that workers have rejected a contract proposal put up for a vote by their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The MEA's move has effectively closed down cargo operations at Canada's second largest port—save for shipping to Newfoundland and the Magdalen Islands—and follows the lockout of some 700 port foremen Monday, November 4, by the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association. The BCMEA has shuttered operations at the Port of Vancouver, the largest in the country, as well as in Prince Rupert. At the smaller port operations in Quebec City, 81 dockworkers—for whom CUPE is also the bargaining agent—have been locked out by their employers for more than two years, and have been replaced by scabs.

The employers on both coasts have crippled Canada's largest port operations with the aim of compelling the Trudeau Liberal government to intervene and enforce pro-company contracts through binding arbitration or other anti-democratic means. Given the central role that the ports play in the economic life of North America, they calculate that the Trudeau government will do their bidding and entrench the highly exploitative and dangerous working conditions that prevail at the ports, so as to prove to the major corporations and global investors that Canada is a "reliable partner" with "competitive" transportation infrastructure.

The trade union-backed Liberal government has repeatedly intervened to break strikes by transport and logistics workers, including criminalizing a strike by Port of Montreal workers in 2021 and using the Canada Industrial Relations Board to short-circuit a strike by BC dockers in July 2023.

"The Maritime Employers Association condemns the negative result of the vote held by the Montreal Longshoremen's Union on the final offer submitted

Thursday and has no choice but to declare a lockout this evening at 9 p.m.," the MEA arrogantly declared in a statement Sunday that displayed its utter contempt for workers' democratic rights.

"The MEA reiterates its request to the Minister of Labour, Steven MacKinnon, to intervene to resolve the impasse as quickly as possible."

Speaking like a mafia boss in a shakedown, Port of Montreal CEO Julie Gascon announced at a press conference Monday that a prolonged lockout would be "catastrophic" for the Canadian economy. "Each container that is not moved here in Montreal is a missing piece in the Canadian economy," Gascon declared. "Today, the lockout affects the logistics chain. Tomorrow, it'll be the factories. After that, it'll be the retailers."

Workers at the Port of Montreal have been demanding parity with the 20 percent wage increase over four years given to dockers at Vancouver and Halifax. Just as importantly, workers want an end to unpredictable scheduling and grueling workloads that give them no work-life balance. These demands have been rebuffed by the MEA, which offered instead 19 percent over six years—3 percent per year over four years followed by two years of 3.5 percent wage increases.

Striking a militant pose, CUPE spokesman Michel Murray told a press conference Monday that "Dockworkers won't get down on one knee," while reiterating that the union had been trying to get the MEA to resume negotiations over the last three weeks, with no success.

However, in the face of the MEA's intransigence, the dockworkers' union bureaucracy handed the initiative to the employers. Despite possessing an overwhelming strike mandate, they first limited job action to a three-day strike in September, and an overtime ban followed by an indefinite strike at just two terminals involving about a quarter of the workforce, which began two weeks ago. This left the majority of Montreal dockworkers on the job, while the

employers stonewalled in preparation for a lockout.

On the West Coast, it was reported Sunday that talks to end the week-old lockout have broken down. Representatives of the BCMEA and International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 514 had met separately with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service with no progress. “On that basis, the FMCS concluded the mediation, and no further meetings are scheduled,” the BCMEA announced in a press release.

A statement by the Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Quebec (FCCQ) published on November 7 demanded that the federal government take immediate action to “definitively resolve” the dispute at the ports, following the example of the move by MacKinnon to impose arbitration on 9,300 engineers, conductors, yard workers and rail controllers at Canadian Pacific Kansas City and Canadian National in August after a brief lockout.

“The labour disputes at the ports of Montreal and British Columbia represent a perfect storm. Our supply chains, already weakened in recent years, have been particularly challenged in recent months. Despite the federal government’s intervention in the rail disputes last summer, the current situation is increasingly looking like an economic catastrophe, requiring similar government action,” complained Alexandre Gagnon, Vice-President, Labour and Human Capital at the FCCQ. “The FCCQ is concerned that our entire Canadian economy is being jeopardized by these numerous labour disputes.”

Amid a rising wave of strikes reflecting the determination of workers across Canada to confront the surging cost of living, and repeated rejections of sellout agreements brought back by the union bureaucracies, the lockout has become the favoured means by which big business seeks to prompt direct government intervention on their side to enforce their concession demands. Their ability to do this results from the unions’ systematic suppression of the class struggle, including their efforts to isolate workers who manage to take strike action and close alliance with the big business Liberal government. Numerous union bureaucracies have repeatedly delayed calling all-out strikes despite overwhelming authorizations by the rank and file. At Canada Post, for example, 55,000 postal workers are being kept on the job by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) more than a week after their strike deadline despite delivering a strike vote of over 95 percent.

It is increasingly clear that every contract struggle is a fight not just against exploitative employers, but the Liberal government as well. With the backing of all the parties in Parliament and the union bureaucracy that is a key pillar of support for its rule, the Liberal government has run roughshod over the right to strike, wielding the cudgel of the

Canada Industrial Relations Board in one hand and back-to-work legislation in the other.

The likelihood of government intervention against dockers in Montreal and BC is increased due to the strategic importance of these ports in North American supply chains, which serve as the basis for US and Canadian imperialism to project their power and assert their predatory interests around the world. The smooth operation of these ports is all the more critical with the Biden administration’s escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine, and the shipment of materiel for Israel’s genocide in Gaza and expanding war in the Middle East.

Notwithstanding the impending threat of government intervention, Montreal and BC dockworkers have powerful allies at ports across Canada and the US, and throughout the working class, to beat back the ruling-class onslaught and fight for their just demands. Dockworkers north and south of the border confront the same transnational companies which operate on every continent and the same miserable working conditions. The millions of logistics workers across North America who move freight by sea, land and air also have a direct stake in this fight. Dockworkers at ports along the US East and Gulf coast, who had their strike shut down by the International Longshoremen’s Association in October after less than three days in a backroom deal between the White House, will once again be in a strike position as of January.

Longshore workers in British Columbia and Quebec must decisively reject Canadian and Quebec nationalism to unite their struggles and reach out to their brothers and sisters internationally in the US and beyond through the formation of rank-and-file committees, which can take control of their struggle out of the hands of the bureaucrats. By taking their fight into their own hands, dockers can appeal for a unified struggle, drawing in broader layers of the working class to fight for what workers need, not what the employers and government say is affordable.



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