

# With contract vote looming on the east coast, Trump's tariffs would place a heavy burden on dockworkers

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More than 40,000 workers in the International Longshoremen's Association from the East and Gulf Coasts are set to vote on February 25 on a new contract. The deal was announced at the 11th hour on January 8 to block a strike which would have shut down much of US shipping.

A major feature of the deal is that it was reportedly brokered through heavy intervention from then-President-elect Donald Trump. Afterwards, ILA President Harold Daggett hailed the fascist Trump as "one of the best friends of working men and women in the United States." Prior to the strike deadline, Trump had issued nationalist statements claiming that "foreign" companies were to blame for job losses on the ports due to automation, and claimed that his "America First" program of high tariffs and trade war would save jobs in the United States.

This past Friday, Trump announced that he would introduce tariffs on goods from several countries. This was followed up this week by the announcement of new tariffs on steel and aluminum products. He is preparing a trade war against the rivals, and even the nominal allies, of US imperialism. Despite his recent "pause" of tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods, Trump will not hesitate to impose them to achieve the desired economic and political aims. Trump also threatened to impose tariffs on Japan.

Not only the ILA, but significant sections of the union bureaucracy have embraced Trump's ultra-nationalism, in particular the claim that protectionist measures will save American jobs. Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien is another top Trump supporter, and United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain has endorsed Trump's tariff measures while hypocritically claiming to oppose his attacks on immigrants.

This claim is a lie. These trade war policies are aimed

not at protecting "American" jobs from foreign competition, but to reinforce the domination of US capitalism over the world economy. The domestic corollary to this policy is massive attacks on the working class, beginning with immigrants, but expanding to workers in every industry.

By promoting Trump, Daggett, O'Brien and others are trying to break the strength of the working class, whose power lies in the global unity of its interests. In opposition to this, dockworkers must form independent rank-and-file committees to take power out of the hands of the bureaucracy, whether they support Trump or his feckless opponents in the Democratic Party. Rejecting the program of "America First," workers must take up the slogan, "Workers of the World, Unite!"

Moreover, Trump's policies are shot through with contradictions, and imposing tariffs on an increasingly integrated world economy threatens to produce massive economic shocks, both at home and abroad. The cost of this trade war will be borne by the working class—especially by dockworkers. Because of their crucial position in the global economy, dockworkers would be among the first to feel the effects of Trump's tariffs and of other countries' retaliatory tariffs.

## What is at stake for dockworkers

The ocean ports handle about 77 percent of US overseas cargo, representing a trade value of \$4.6 trillion, according to the US Department of Transportation's 2023 report to Congress. The value of goods moved per month increased from more than \$90 billion in 2019 to almost

\$200 billion in the summer of 2022.

Dockworkers on the East and Gulf Coasts handle the lion's share of these shipments. Ports on the Gulf Coast handle approximately 51 percent of shipments by volume, according to the Department of Transportation. The Atlantic Coast handles about 19 percent, and the Pacific Coast about 12 percent. US ports support the employment of more than 31 million people, according to the American Association of Ports Authorities.

Tariffs are paid by companies that import goods across the border. They increase these companies' costs, and the companies often raise their prices to recoup these costs. Ultimately, the cost of tariffs is passed on to consumers. Trump's proposed tariffs could affect oil and lumber from Canada; produce, clothing, liquor and auto parts from Mexico; and plastics, textiles and computer chips from China, among other products.

Sections of the financial and corporate oligarchy are nervous about the potential effects of Trump's tariffs. Last week, S&P Global Ratings estimated that these effects would be "overwhelmingly negative." The agency's economic team found that the tariffs could slow growth in the US gross domestic product, increase unemployment and increase inflation. Their analysis was based on the 25 percent tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods (which have been paused) and the additional 10 percent tariff on Chinese goods.

The pro-corporate Tax Foundation predicted that the tariffs could disrupt supply chains, increase costs for businesses, drive up consumer prices and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs. The tariffs would especially damage the automotive, energy and food industries. The US imports nearly half of its auto parts from Canada and Mexico, and tariffs on these countries could slow or halt auto production and raise prices. Canada and Mexico also supply more than 70 percent of US crude oil imports, and tariffs on these countries could raise gas prices by as much as 50 cents per gallon in the Midwest, according to the Tax Foundation.

Trump's tariffs would increase inflation, which was at a 2.9 percent annual rate in December, by 0.4 percentage points this year, said Gregory Daco, the chief economist at the tax and consulting firm EY. The US economy, which grew by 2.8 percent in 2024, would decline by 1.5 percent this year and by 2.1 percent in 2026, he added.

Moreover, Trump's tariffs would reduce the annual purchasing power of the average American household by \$1,000 to \$1,200, according to the Budget Lab at Yale University. The above estimates assume that the tariffs

include Mexico and Canada, as well as China.

Almost half of all US imports come from Canada, China and Mexico, and the new tariffs could reduce overall US imports by 15 percent, according to Bloomberg Economics. With or without potential tariffs against additional countries, this reduction in trade would directly threaten dockworkers with layoffs and job cuts.

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has not issued any warnings about how Trump's tariffs would affect dockworkers on the East and Gulf Coasts. On the contrary, the union has lavished praise on the fascist president.

While Trump attempts to blame overseas corporations for automation, American based companies, which also operate all over the globe, are also pursuing automation to reduce their labor costs and increase their profits. Covering up this fact, the ILA is cultivating national chauvinism to prepare the working class for the military conflict that ultimately results from trade war.

To a greater extent than ever, the world's national economies have become globally integrated. The remarkable volume and total value of commodities that dockworkers handle each day are concrete reflections of this global integration. Under these circumstances, nationalist programs such as the one that Trump and the ILA are advancing are not only hopeless, but also reactionary. The extraordinary integration of the world economy, along with advances in communication and transportation, make it possible to provide a high standard of living to the entire world population. The only obstacle to the elimination of want is the profit system.

Dockworkers—and all workers—in every country face the same profit-driven attacks on their pay, benefits, working conditions and jobs. In a global economy, workers can only defend their standard of living by uniting across national boundaries. The promotion of national chauvinism is an effort by the ruling class to pit various sections of the international working class against each other. Workers must reject this nationalist poison, along with the political parties and trade unions that promote it, in favor of an international struggle against capitalism, which is the cause of economic crisis and war.



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