US East coast dock union's "solution" to automation in new contract: work harder!

John Conrad, Tom Hall
19 February 2025

On February 25, over 40,000 East and Gulf Coast dockworkers will vote on a proposed six-year labor contract worked out by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) union and the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX). Almost a month after the last-minute announcement of the tentative agreement on January 8, the ILA released a 50-minute video, featuring pre-recorded statements by ILA President Harold J. Daggett and Vice President Dennis A. Daggett.

While the video was ostensibly meant to play up the contract "highlights," it shows in fact that the contract offer, which was reached to block a powerful strike, is a miserable sellout. Dockworkers must reject it by the widest possible margin, and organize themselves to prepare for action for a contract which actually meets their demands.

The key issue which workers are prepared to strike over is the question of automation, which the port operators aim to use in order to cut thousands of jobs. They point to the far more advanced technologies being used by rivals of US capitalism, especially China.

In January, when the Daggetts and the ILA announced the deal, they claimed that it was an historic victory which secured crucial safeguards against automation. Now, in the new video, they declare that this, in essence, means that the ILA has pledged to help work its members so hard that automated technologies will be unnecessary.

"For this incredible package, the ILA did pledge to USMX that the union would address and resolve the issue of absentees," the senior Daggett declared. Glaring straight into the camera and shouting and gesticulating, he roared, "We cannot jeopardize the value of this landmark tentative agreement by having members indicate that they will take a job, and then, not show up for work." He then shouted, "I am personally going to make sure this issue is resolved."

In perhaps the most unintentionally revealing moment of the video, Daggett thunders, "The ILA must continue to demonstrate that we can out-perform automation. How can we fight against automation and then tell the companies we are not going to show up? This has got to stop!"

In other words, under the proposed agreement, workers will have to "out-perform" the new technology if they want to keep their jobs. Any "protections" offered in the contract are meant solely to allow the ILA bureaucracy to work dockworkers past the breaking point and drive them into the street.

Daggett's "solution" to automation recalls the folk hero John Henry, a freedman and railroad worker who supposedly died of exhaustion trying to outperform a steam-powered drill. But, as opposed to that tall tale, Daggett's pledge to make workers "out-perform" automation will undoubtedly lead to real tragedies, including accidents and workplace injuries.

Indeed, the port operators already treat the dockworkers as disposable. In the summer of 2022, dockworker and Nicaraguan immigrant Uriel "Popeye" Matamoros was crushed to death on the docks in Newark, New Jersey. According to co-workers, management kept them on the job, making them work around the site of the accident without even having fully cleaned it up. "It smelled awful," one worker told the WSWS.

In the video statement, Daggett fawned over "management officials who have been in our industry for thirty years or more."

As a matter of fact, even a regime of overwork is no guarantee against future automation.

Dennis Daggett referred in the video to a "new technology process" by which USMX and the ILA must agree to any new technology before it is implemented at port terminals. In this process "New Technology Committees" and "local New Technology Co-Chairs" must adhere to something that Daggett vaguely refers to as "the spirit of the new technology principles."

The younger Daggett stated, "if the New Technology Committee cannot resolve all open issues (with the implementation of machines and automation) then, within 30 days, the issues shall go to arbitration. All agreements reached by USMX, the international, the new technology committee, or arbitration shall be final and binding."

© World Socialist Web Site

In other words, the ILA bureaucracy will work hand-in-hand with the companies, and "third party" arbiters and auditors, to oversee the gradual implementation of new automation technologies to drive workers off the ports and increase profits.

With this contract, the ILA is offering its services to the American oligarchy as a labor police force to discipline a key section of the working class.

The lessons of other recent contracts are essential. Within weeks of the ratification of contracts which union officials described as "historic" at UPS and in the auto industry, thousands of layoffs began, with automation as a chief factor. These contracts were passed under false pretenses, and the union bureaucracy has responded to the layoffs with guilty silence.

More support for Trump

The ILA bureaucracy is not only working hand in glove with management, but with the fascist Trump administration (However, Daggett also gave a shout out to Julie Su, the acting Labor Secretary in the latter half of the Biden administration, who had worked with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union on the West Coast to impose a sellout contract).

Much of the recorded video was taken up by heaping fawning praise of Trump, whose "powerful assistance" the Daggetts credited for reaching the agreement. "I have enjoyed a relationship with President Donald Trump that goes back decades," Harold Daggett said. "We are the same age, both born in Queens, New York, and are pretty good street fighters."

To the extent that the reference to "street fighters" means anything, it is that Daggett is fully plugged into the essentially criminal world of New York real estate and finance which produced Trump, while also identifying himself with Trump's overt thuggishness and brutality.

Reading aloud portions of a social media post by Trump in December which promoted "America First" on the docks, Daggett claimed Trump showed "compassion for ILA workers whose jobs were threatened by *foreign* companies trying to automate *US* ports [emphasis added]." He concluded: "In my 60 years with the ILA, we have never had the support of a US President backing the ILA the way that President Trump has supported us. He continues to prove that he is a friend of working men and women in America, especially longshore workers."

Daggett said these words as Trump is summarily firing tens of thousands of workers in the federal government, while handing over key government functions to billionaire fascist Elon Musk. He is launching a massive assault on immigrant workers—many of whom are also ILA members—as the tip of the spear to abolish democratic rights, redefine citizenship as requiring loyalty to his government, and establishing the groundwork for a fascist dictatorship. None of this, of course, was mentioned in the video.

What matters for Daggett and the ILA bureaucracy is only that their bread will continued to be buttered under the new regime. There are no levels to which they will not stoop, from the standpoint of the rights of the working class, in order to secure this.

The ILA is part of a broader shift towards collaboration with Trump by the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien, a top Trump ally who is emerging as a right-wing ideologue in his own right, declared his indifference to federal layoffs in a recent Fox News interview, declaring that Trump "thinks he's within his right." In fact, the mass firings are patently illegal.

As for Trump's "America First" trade war measures, which are broadly supported by the nationalist union bureaucracy, this will lead to a massive economic crisis, the cost of which will be shifted onto workers—beginning with the docks, which are a critical nodal point in world production. This, in turn, will only accelerate the drive by management to automate operations in order to cut costs.

Dockworkers must combine a massive rejection of the sellout contract with a rejection of the ILA bureaucracy's support for fascism. This requires taking matters into their own hands through rank-and-file committees fighting to transfer power from the Daggetts and the rest of the ILA officialdom to dockworkers themselves. Instead of "America First," they must link up with port workers across the US, all of North America and the world, building a broader movement combining the defense of the social rights of the working class with the fight against dictatorship.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site