

# Trade war against China fuels disruption for US ports, threatening job losses

Joshua Rodriguez

22 April 2025

In spite of an imposition of a 90-day pause on Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs which were announced April 2, expanding tariff measures directed at China continue to throw global markets into disarray.

In particular, trade at some of the largest ports in the US is affected by port fees proposed by the office of the US Trade Representative (USTR). These range from \$1 million to \$3.5 million for each Chinese-built vessel which docks at any US port. The USTR is aiming to impose the port fees by October 14, 2025 with an implementation hearing to begin in mid-May.

The implications of these multi-million-dollar port fees will be nothing short of disastrous for workers inside the US and abroad.

In an interview with *Politico*, Gene Seroka, executive director of the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach, stated that \$3 trillion worth of US imports and the jobs associated with them will be on the chopping block.

"The impact is wide-reaching," Seroka said. "One in nine jobs in Southern California, about a million people, go to work every day with the efforts that emanate from this port."

"So, every four containers we move create a job, on average. You start looking at a dissipation of about 10 percent of the cargo, you start chipping away at those jobs."

Workers are keenly aware that global corporations will offset the increased operating costs associated with tariffs and port fees by passing costs onto consumers or canceling cargo deliveries altogether.

At a time where prices for everyday goods are already at a historic high, the imposition of tariffs and port fees will continue to make life impossible for workers.

## ILWU union backs Trump

Despite this, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which covers tens of thousands of West Coast dock workers in Canada and the US, threw its support behind the port fees at an International Trade Commission hearing held on March 24 in Washington.

The ILWU supported the port fees on the claim that this would revitalize American shipbuilding capacity and counter supposed unfair Chinese trade practices which, the ILWU argued, weakened

America's industrial base and led to job losses.

The only critique from the ILWU came from their concern that potential cargo could be diverted to ports in Mexico and Canada and then shipped to the US via truck or rail, circumventing the proposed port fees. In other words, the ILWU bureaucrats are urging the fascistic Trump administration to take even more aggressive trade war measures.

Representatives of the ILWU bureaucracy recommended the imposition of additional land border fees to address the issue. At the hearing, pushback over the port fees and their disastrous effects did not come from the official trade unions but from leading business and trade representatives, who argued that the fees would harm their bottom line.

This has caused the USTR to backtrack and consider levying fees which are less onerous for retailers, farmers and port operators.

In reality, American corporations are responsible for the destruction of American jobs. The trade union bureaucracy has been a full partner in this.

When the west coast dockworkers' contract expired in 2022, the ILWU kept its members on the job for more than a year without a contract. But when workers responded to endless delays by taking job actions on their own, the union worked with the Biden administration to rapidly impose a new contract before workers had time to review it.

Under Biden, union bureaucrats across the country imposed major sellout contracts and blocked strikes in the name of the so-called "national interest." Last summer, Biden summed up this relationship by calling the AFL-CIO his "domestic NATO," indicating their critical role in securing supply chains and imposing labor peace on workers in preparation for new wars.

## Mass layoffs

While Trump is ripping up workers' democratic rights and aiming to establish a dictatorship, the union bureaucracy is seeking to continue this relationship under his administration. Major unions, including the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters and the East Coast dockworkers union, the International Longshoremen's Association, have explicitly backed Trump's tariff measures,

claiming that they will bring back “American” jobs. Earlier this year, the ILA rammed through a new six-year contract brokered by Trump, declaring the would-be *führer* the “friend” of American workers.

The reality is the opposite. Craig Fuller, founder and CEO of global logistics news media *FreightWaves*, has indicated on X, formerly Twitter, that the trade war measures will be a “bloodbath” for US truck workers.

“Many truckers I’ve spoken with don’t realize how quickly container volumes have collapsed,” Fuller proclaimed. “Starting in May, port freight out of California will be almost eliminated.”

In another update posted two days later, Fuller added, “Freight markets serving retail and manufacturing are struggling, with heavy manufacturing getting completely obliterated.”

## From trade war to World War

According to data provided by *FreightWaves*, Atlanta, Dallas and Chicago freight trucking volumes are down 12 percent, 13 percent and 19 percent respectively. The largest decline is in Cleveland, down 35 percent, on top of an overall 10 percent decline in truckload demand over the previous year.

The claim that US shipbuilders can replace Chinese-made vessels frozen out by tariffs and port fees flies in the face of reality. Twenty of the largest container ships by capacity were built or are operated by Chinese and South Korean corporations. These massive ships average about 22,500 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) capacity or more, while the largest US-built container ship, the *Daniel K. Inouye*, has a 3,600 TEU capacity.

According to a USTR report produced last year under the Biden administration, America currently ranks 19th in the world in commercial shipbuilding, building fewer than five ships a year. In 1975, the US built 70 ships a year and was ranked first in the world market, at a point when globalization was still in its infancy.

Today, China currently builds more than 1,700 ships a year, with 74 percent of all new shipbuilding orders being placed in China during the 2024 fiscal year.

Chinese shipyards are a crucial part of the globalized economy, moving freight all over the world, not just Chinese exports. The US agricultural sector has also started to feel the economic cost of these trade war measures, because China is the largest importer of US-made agricultural products, which are shipped by Chinese-made cargo vessels.

Other Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand also import a sizable amount of wheat, corn, and soybeans from the US market, again with Chinese-made vessels.

A number of Asian markets are exploring the possibility of purchasing their grain from exporters in Latin America or the Black Sea region in order to avoid US tariffs and port fees associated with Chinese-made vessels.

The Chinese maritime industry is already showing signs of a slump due to the unforeseen and sporadic character of the proposed port fees, indicated by a slight decline in Chinese ship

sales in recent weeks.

Whatever tactical differences exist, and in spite of the disastrous consequences, trade war against China has bipartisan support. The above-mentioned USTR study, produced at the request of the United Steelworkers (USW) and four other US unions, is the basis of Trump’s plans to impose fees on Chinese vessels. The investigation claimed that China enjoyed “unreasonable” superiority in the maritime, logistics and shipbuilding sectors, which is “severely disadvantaging U.S. companies, workers and the U.S. economy.”

The fundamental aim of these and similar measures are to prepare US supply chains for a massive war against China, which would inevitably involve large-scale naval battles. The text of the SHIPS for America Act, aimed at boosting the US maritime industry and first proposed in the last months of the Biden White House, explicitly cites “[supporting] the national defense and economic security” as the central rationale.

While they have a deranged and desperate character to them, Trump’s trade war measures follow a class logic rooted in geopolitical, economic and military considerations.

As the official US debt amounts to \$36 trillion, increasing \$10 billion per day, the US ruling elite seek to extricate themselves from their financial issues by waging ever more reckless provocations against friend and foe alike.

Trade war, and the eventual world war it will spark, must be opposed by workers internationally at all costs.

The issues facing the American working class are not emanating from Canadian, Mexican or even Chinese workers, but from the pro-corporate policies of the capitalist class in every country.

The only viable alternative is the rejection of “America First” and all other forms of nationalism in favor of the global unity of the working class against capitalist exploitation, war and dictatorship.

This requires a rebellion against the pro-corporate collaborators with fascism in the trade union bureaucracy, through the development of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, overthrowing the bureaucracy and returning power to the shop floor.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**