

Dockworker unions back trade war amid collapse of traffic on US docks

Joshua Rodriguez, Tom Hall**15 May 2025**

US President Donald Trump's protectionist tariffs has led to a sharp decline in shipping volumes at American ports. But the responsibility does not lie with Trump alone. The union bureaucracies, including the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Teamsters and others, have lined up behind the "America First" trade war agenda.

This is the outcome of decades of nationalist and pro-capitalist policies that reflect the social interests of the union bureaucracy which are diametrically opposed to those of the workers. A movement in the working class against Trump will emerge alongside—and through—a growing rebellion against the sellout union apparatus.

Among those backing Trump and his trade war are the dockworker unions. On the East and Gulf Coasts, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) recently pushed through a new six-year contract brokered by Trump. Union President Harold Daggett praised the would-be dictator as "one of the best friends of working men and women in the United States."

On the West Coast, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which has historically presented itself as the "left" alternative to the gangster-ridden ILA, has also backed protectionist measures. While the ILWU has recently been compelled to make a verbal retreat, it continues to endorse the nationalist rhetoric underpinning these policies.

Workers are being forced to bear the brunt of the massive economic fallout from the trade war. Shipping volumes on the West Coast have already fallen to their lowest levels since the early months of the pandemic, when much of the global economy was paralyzed by lockdowns.

The Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have reported a 44 percent drop in traffic, and the head of the Port of Seattle recently stated that no container ships were docked there at all. The Port of Oakland, the third-largest on the West Coast, has experienced a 60 percent decline in ocean container bookings due to the ongoing trade war.

Joe, a Long Beach dockworker, told the WSWS: "From my understanding, it's definitely cutting jobs. Crane operators are going back to the haul, picking up jobs when they are not at their regular terminal, which is basically a steady. So now they're back at the [hiring] hall, which means a pay cut. So it goes on down the line.

"This is gonna trickle all the way down. We depend on moving

cargo. If there's no cargo to move, we don't work. It's as simple as that."

Joe added: "They just lifted the 70 percent rule, which means that IDs [the higher-tier 'A' and 'B' men] aren't required to pick up 70 percent of the jobs they are offered. So that's when you know that work is getting slow. As for casuals [the lowest tier of dockworkers], they are waiving the six-month rule, that you have to work at least one shift every six months to keep your casual card."

Having begun at the ports, the impact is now rippling throughout the entire economy, triggering mass layoffs at UPS and in the steel industry, along with a sharp decline in freight trucking volumes.

According to a report from CNBC, tariffs against China have "pushed [the] global supply chain near breaking point." Although the steepest tariffs have been placed on a 90-day pause, the agreement "won't quickly quiet U.S. manufacturers' anxiety about how to reduce risks related to China for the long-term."

"The first blows of the tariff war have landed on global manufacturers," consultant John Piatek told the business outlet. April figures showed "concerning" stockpiling of inventory in response to the tariffs by US companies, he warned. "The first signs of manufacturers anticipating slower demand and supply shortages have emerged."

Whatever happens, a turning point has been reached. The tariffs signal the end of the world economy as it has existed since the end of World War II and mark the reemergence of the nationalist protectionist policies that led to that war—and that will inevitably lead to a third, unless stopped by the working class.

Guilty silence from the ILA

Since Trump's so-called "Liberation Day" tariffs in early April, the ILA has maintained a guilty silence. This stands in stark contrast to the lengthy tirades delivered by Daggett during contract talks, which were intended to present the agreement—reached after the union shut down a strike late last year—as the result of "hard bargaining."

While it has not issued a single statement on the tariffs, the ILA did release a statement praising F. Paul De Maria, the new CEO and chairman of the US Maritime Alliance (USMX). De Maria

served as the shipping industry's lead negotiator during the ILA contract talks.

"Thank goodness USMX made Paul De Maria the lead negotiator for management's side when they did," ILA President Daggett enthused, adding "his appointment to this new role was instrumental in avoiding a second strike." De Maria, returning the compliment, praised the ILA for "[aligning] around a shared path forward that ensures our industry continues to grow and thrive."

In another lengthy statement, Harold Daggett's son and second-in-command, Dennis Daggett, chastised workers for not paying their dues. From the standpoint of the bureaucracy, "supporting the union" means financing their own bloated salaries. According to Department of Labor figures, the Daggetts collectively took in more than \$2 million in total reported compensation last year.

Radical posturing by the ILWU

In testimony at the April 22 meeting of the International Trade Commission, the ILWU voiced support for port fees proposed by Trump's US Trade Representative on Chinese-made vessels. This measure alone would have a colossal impact on trade, given China's dominance in the global shipbuilding industry. Roughly 70 percent of new cargo ship orders are placed with Chinese shipyards.

The *World Socialist Web Site* published an article exposing the ILWU's support for the tariffs the same day. On April 26, the ILWU issued a partial verbal retreat, releasing a statement denouncing Trump's tariffs as "reckless, shortsighted policies [that] have begun to devastate American workers, harm critical sectors of the economy, and line the pockets of the ultra-wealthy at the expense of hardworking families."

But the ILWU statement opposes Trump's tariffs on nationalist grounds, stating they amount to an "'America First' Trade Policy in Name Only." It concludes by calling for "fair trade policies that put working-class Americans first, protect jobs, and reduce taxes on the American people." In other words, while the ILWU postures as a critic of Trump's specific tariff measures, it supports the broader reactionary premise that tariffs are necessary to defend "American" jobs—pitting workers in the US against their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Significantly, the statement does not withdraw the union's support for the anti-Chinese port fees.

ILWU officials are maneuvering to get ahead of explosive rank-and-file anger that threatens to escape their control. In a statement issued Tuesday, union President Bobby Olvera Jr. declared Trump's actions "an unprecedented assault on workers" and "serious threats to long-standing civil and political rights." The Democratic Party, he added, "with a few notable exceptions," has "failed the American worker and can no longer be relied upon to be an effective opposition to the war on the working class."

In reality, the Democratic Party—which the ILWU and nearly every other union has backed for decades—could *never* be relied upon to oppose the "war on the working class." As a party of

American capitalism, it has always been on the other side. Even in an earlier period, when Democrats such as Franklin Roosevelt enacted social reforms, they did so not out of solidarity with workers but to save American capitalism from the threat of revolution.

That period ended more than half a century ago. Since then, the Democratic Party has been a full partner with the Republicans in carrying out the assault on workers, both in the United States and internationally.

Even as the union characterizes Trump's policies as a danger to workers and democracy, it proposes no mobilization of the working class to fight back. Instead, it offers only to expand its legislative committees and hire a new political consulting firm in Washington D.C.—moves aimed at preserving the bureaucracy's privileges, not organizing any serious struggle against the American Führer.

Moreover, they open the door to open collaboration with Trump and the extreme right. The union's lobbying efforts will "[assist] us in working with legislators on both *sides of the aisle* (emphasis added). The ILWU will no longer offer blind allegiance to any political party or individual politician."

The latter sentence is the exact same construction used by the Teamsters and the UAW to justify their collaboration with Trump. From the rostrum of the Republican National Committee last year, Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien called for "bipartisanship" and declared the Teamsters union is "not beholden to anyone or any party."

The ILWU's backhanded overtures to Trump are in continuity with its policies under Biden, where it worked with the White House to block a strike for more than a year and impose a sellout contract. Biden, whose administration intervened in talks from the start, stressed that he saw the operations of the docks as preparing the country for new wars.

The fight against trade war, world war and dictatorship must be based in the working class, which is only possible through a rebellion against the union bureaucracy. Whatever specific positions staked out by each union, the bureaucracy in all cases is concerned above all with preserving its corrupt relations with management and the government which depend on its ability to enforce labor peace.

Massive social conflicts are on the horizon. To prepare, workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union officials and both political parties, to plan a common strategy and carry out their democratic will. This must be connected to an international strategy, rejecting "America First" in favor of unity with workers in China, Latin America and all over the world.



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