

US Coast Guard to escort grain ship against dockworkers' protest

Hector Cordon
12 January 2012

In the first use of the military against a labor struggle since President Nixon ordered troops against the 1970 postal strike, the US Coast Guard announced that they would escort a grain ship to the EGT terminal at the Port of Longview, Washington.

According to *The Daily News*, "The Coast Guard will deploy one or two vessels to escort the grain ship up the Columbia River, with more on call if necessary, said Lt. Lucas Elder, a spokesman for the Coast Guard's Portland-based marine safety unit. Other law enforcement agencies will also be present, he said."

In addition to armed ships, the Coast Guard plans to deploy helicopters and small vessels from the mouth of the Columbia River to the EGT facility. Additional law enforcement will be present from multiple jurisdictions as well as local police.

EGT, a joint venture between Japan-based Itochu, St. Louis-based Bunge North America and Korean shipper STX Pan Ocean, has been seeking over the last year to quash the requirement of the Port that they hire members of Local 21 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

To this end, EGT filed a lawsuit against the port a year ago contending that its contract allows hiring of non-ILWU labor. The company estimates it would save \$1 million yearly by using outside labor. It presently has a contract employing workers from another union, General Construction and Operating Engineers Local 701.

Ongoing protests by dockworkers since January of last year escalated in September when ILWU members and supporters sought to block a train heading to the terminal. Two separate attempts to stop the train were suppressed by riot police, who arrested 19 protesters in the process. The next morning several hundred workers and supporters entered the port's terminal grounds and

dumped grain from the train cars.

That day thousands of dockworkers in the Northwest responded to these attacks in a wildcat strike, shutting down ports in Seattle, Tacoma, Everett and Anacortes, Washington in solidarity with the struggle in Longview. (See, "Wildcat strikes shut down Washington docks for one day")

The use of police, clad in riot gear and bearing rubber bullet-loaded rifles, to intimidate and arrest protesters has been complemented by the actions of the National Labor Relations Board and the federal courts. In September the NLRB asked to have Local 21 found in contempt of court for violating a restraining order issued by US District Court Judge Ronald Leighton.

The NLRB, headed by Obama appointee and labor lawyer Mark Pierce, has aggressively intervened on EGT's side, seeking a ruling of unfair labor practice against the ILWU, which, if upheld, would effectively end the dispute in EGT's favor. Also requested, in cooperation with lawyers for EGT, was a ban on all picketing as well as fines against the union.

The decision of the Coast Guard, which operates under the Department of Homeland Security, to intervene against ILWU members is a distinct elevation of the Obama administration's efforts to crush the struggle of dockworkers to defend their jobs and wages.

Obama's pledge to transform the US into an export economy, doubling exports by 2015, is what lies behind these attacks on the working class. The response of the unions has been to offer up hard-won gains in order to protect their existence and their dues base.

The ILWU is determined to avoid any industrial action. The ILWU has sought to limit any struggle to impotent protests, civil disobedience and reliance on the courts. In this they are seeking to prove their reliability as a police force over the rank-and-file to

EGT and terminal operators.

The NLRB is seeking a second injunction against the ILWU to prohibit the disruption of any work on West Coast docks while it is protesting against EGT. The NLRB claims that such a disruption would be a violation of Taft-Hartley. The ILWU has responded that, “A call for a protest of EGT is not a call for a shutdown of West Coast ports and must not result in one.”

Throughout this conflict the ILWU has sought to whip up nationalist sentiment by denouncing EGT as a foreign multinational corporation, even though Bunge, the main investor, is based in the United States.

Despite the ever-increasing aggression of the federal government against the union the ILWU insists on maintaining its political alliance with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. This orientation has meshed with the leadership of the local Occupy protests, which has organized demonstrations on the docks. They, together with a host of pseudo-left organizations, have promoted the ILWU entirely uncritically, covering up for its isolation of the dockworkers.

At the same time, the utilization of the Occupy movement by the ILWU in protests at the terminals conveniently allows the union bureaucracy to posture as opponents of the “1%” while committing them to absolutely nothing. ILWU President Bob McEllrath warned Local 21, “Please take extreme caution when dealing with supporters of non-ILWU sanctioned calls to action relative to EGT.” He continued, “We welcome outside support for our efforts against EGT but must make effective use of collective power.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact