

With contract expiring soon for East Coast dockworkers, ILA make radical-sounding statements to head off rank-and-file anger

Tom Hall
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Dockworkers: Tell us what you're fighting for in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Wednesday, with time winding down before the expiration of the contract for tens of thousands of East Coast dockworkers, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) president gave a pre-recorded statement reiterating threats to strike if a new deal is not in place by September 30.

The video, with ILA President Harold Daggett and his son, Executive Vice President Dennis Daggett, was followed up with a pre-recorded interview with the elder Daggett released Thursday.

Declaring talks "at an impasse," the elder Daggett declared, "There's a real chance we won't have a new agreement in place. We could be hitting the streets at 12:01 AM on Tuesday, October 1, 2024."

Workers should be warned, however, that this is so much hot air. The ILA bureaucracy is working behind the scenes to impose a sellout much like the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) did last year for the West Coast dockworkers.

In particular, the ILA bureaucracy is drawing from the playbook of the Teamsters last year at UPS and the United Auto Workers at the Detroit Big Three automakers. Both unions used radical-sounding talk to ease the passage of deals with massive hidden concessions.

In the lead-up to talks last year, UAW President Shawn Fain claimed to be demanding a 32-hour workweek and an end to tiered wages. Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien issued continuous strike threats and broke off official negotiations in the lead-up to a self-imposed strike deadline, much as the ILA is doing now.

But the Teamsters, after violating their own deadline, announced a deal to block a strike, while the UAW called only a limited "stand-up strike" that did not seriously impact production before pushing through a deal of its own.

Since then, thousands of workers in both industries have lost their jobs, while the noisy rhetoric of the union bureaucrats has been replaced with a guilty silence. A general rule of thumb has emerged: The bigger the talk beforehand, the bigger the sellout that is being planned.

Dockworkers must learn the lessons from this experience, above all that a real fight requires a rank-and-file rebellion against the union bureaucracy. There is immense potential to build a broader

movement uniting with Boeing workers, railroaders, teachers and others, but this can only be done through the creation of new leadership, rank-and-file committees.

There can also be no doubt that a deal is being worked out behind the scenes with the Biden administration, which is prepared to issue an injunction in the event of a coast-wide strike.

Even in the course of their grandstanding, the Daggetts pointed to the terrible working conditions which the bureaucracy has signed off on. "These greedy companies have made billions in the past few years, especially during Covid," Harold Daggett said. "We never shut the ports down during covid. ILA members lost their lives. When people worked from home ... not my men. My men went to the docks every day."

In fact, though he treated it in the past tense, the pandemic is still ongoing and workers are still getting seriously ill on the job with minimal protections. But Daggett made no suggestion that the docks should have been shut down, or at least limited to essential goods such as medicine and food. Meanwhile, while the ILA let dockworkers suffer and die for profits, Harold Daggett made \$3.6 million since 2020, while Dennis Daggett made more than \$2.7 million, according to federal records.

To the extent that industrial workplaces were shut down in the opening months of the pandemic, workers often had to take wildcat action, as they did in the auto industry, to thwart attempts by the union bureaucrats to keep production going.

It is worth noting Daggett's statement is taken almost verbatim from O'Brien, who bragged last year that UPS workers kept "going to work every single day ... putting themselves at risk, putting their families at risk," leading the company to double its profits.

Dennis Daggett continued: "[Working on the docks] is not a 9 to 5 job, it's not a 40-hour [a week] job ... life-work balance, you don't get that in the ILA.

"Our members sacrifice a lot with their families. They don't get to go to dance recitals or ball games. They have to work, and our members have to put in over 100 hours a week most of the time." He added: "And we're not complaining about that."

This raises the question: If the ILA is willing to accept such conditions as a baseline, what else are they willing to accept?

The younger Daggett added that, in previous contracts, local deals were discussed only after the ratification of the master

contract, which contained a no-strike clause. Presenting this as simply a “mistake” and not deliberate sabotage, he said the carriers “took advantage of that.” This time, he added, the local contracts were being negotiated before the master contract.

But the Teamsters used this same maneuver last year to claim that they were finally “getting serious” at UPS. The result was a contract that green-lights the biggest layoffs in the company’s history. Dennis Daggett also mentioned that local deals had already been reached for Boston and Virginia, however the ILA has not given any information about the terms of these deals.

The Daggetts stressed that a key question is the expanding use of automation on the docks. This is a real issue, and it is already being used to eliminate huge numbers of jobs, including at UPS and in auto. But a key factor in the ability of the companies to slash jobs in this way has been the imposition of sellouts by union bureaucrats.

Harold Daggett referenced the last major dockworkers strike in 1977, citing the longstanding issue of containerization and earlier technologies used by the carriers to slash jobs. But while Daggett presented this as a major victory, the reality is that huge numbers of jobs were cut in the decades following the strike.

They also sought to downplay the danger of an injunction under the anti-worker Taft-Hartley Act. It was mentioned only in passing in Wednesday’s video. In Thursday’s interview, Daggett dismissed it, declaring: “Go ahead!”

In reality, the dockworkers struggle will inevitably develop into a fight against the government. The ILA will dutifully enforce an injunction, just as the railroad unions did when Congress voted to ban a strike two years ago.

But the Biden administration’s preferred route has been to impose de facto injunctions by having the union bureaucrats impose sellout deals. Biden is using his “domestic NATO,” as he referred to the AFL-CIO this summer, as his primary means of imposing labor discipline while the government prepares the country for war.

Internationalism versus the bureaucracy

The Daggetts ended Wednesday’s video by claiming to support a global fight, controlled by the union bureaucracy. “When I get done with our contract,” the elder Daggett claimed, “I’m gonna form an alliance ... with every dockworker union around the world.”

“In today’s world, you have three big companies that want to push automation on everybody... the only way we can fight this is by having this alliance.”

“Let’s take a company, Maersk Line. Let’s say they want to go into Chile and build a fully automated terminal. Well if that’s going to happen, this alliance now will kick in and we will shut down Maersk throughout the world.”

The key word is “after” the contract is in place. This is similar to how UAW president Shawn Fain, to provide the bureaucracy with “left” and even “socialist” cover, claims to be supporting a

national general strike timed for May 1 of 2028. What this really means is promising four years of labor peace in the meantime for corporate America to carry out mass layoffs.

A real international movement capable of shutting down Maersk or any other global corporation can and must emerge, but only on the basis of a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and its nationalist program, combining the fight against exploitation at home with a fight against US imperialism.

Significantly, the ILA and every other major union has completely ignored the call by the Palestinian trade union federation for industrial action to halt the shipment of weapons to Israel.

While Daggett poses as an internationalist, the ILA has long been among the most right-wing, patriotic unions in the United States. The “international” deals of the US union bureaucracy as a whole are designed, not to build but to prevent a global movement of the working class. The American trade unions function are typically conducted through CIA fronts such as US AID.

The reality is that the union bureaucracy is whipsawing workers against each other not just around the world, but within the US itself. With the East Coast ILA and the West Coast ILWU on separate contracts, shippers have been shifting traffic from east to west to dilute the impact of a national strike. Despite empty statements of “solidarity” by Daggett and ILWU President Willie Adams, they have allowed this to take place.

With less than a month to go, dockworkers must begin preparing now to organize a real struggle. This requires a fight not just against management, but against the ILA bureaucrats. Workers must form rank-and-file committees, composed of representatives from docks across the United States and both coasts, in order to prepare action and enforce the democratic will of dockworkers themselves.

They must take the initiative and link up now with dockworkers and others across the world, through the development of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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