

With only days to go before the deadline, US corporations prepare to deal with potential East Coast dock strike

Joshua Rodriguez
27 September 2024

There are only a few days left before a major contract between 45,000 members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the United States Maritime Alliance (UMSX) expires.

Dockworkers under the ILA on both the East and Gulf coasts are committed to strike against stagnant wages, unsafe working environments and the threat that automation and AI have over their jobs.

The US ruling class, meanwhile, is sitting on a social powder keg. They are terrified that dockworkers will link up with the rank-and-file rebellion among 33,000 Boeing and 5,000 Textron Aviation workers, who voted down a concessionary contract brought back by their union, as well as with the millions of workers facing mass layoffs.

Anticipating major disruptions to the international supply chain, major trade groups, including the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Retail Federation, have repeatedly called on the Biden administration to intervene to prevent a strike.

The UMSX has also filed an unfair labor practice against the ILA in a last ditch effort to force the union back into negotiations.

East Coast dock operators are scrambling to move cargo before the anticipated strike date, with companies such as Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd charging "interruption and disruption surcharges" to stockpile as much cargo as soon as possible.

The Class I railroads are assisting in the effort, with North American operator CSX declaring that if a strike were to occur, they would "work port by port to take traffic ... as long as [it] can safely access the terminal" and would accept imports "up until the port goes on strike." The railroads would also play a key role in

moving cargo diverted to the West Coast back to the eastern United States.

For the past several months, the West Coast ports have also seen a steady rise in volume as corporations redirect shipping to the opposite side of the country. By July, the West Coast share of US inbound cargo jumped to 50 percent, compared to a low of 44 percent at the same time last year.

These numbers are likely to go up further. The Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are currently at 80 percent and 70 percent capacity respectively as of September, meaning they have room for more cargo and may even be prepared to go over capacity.

This is a repeat in reverse of the same maneuvers conducted between 2022 through 2023 when the contract for the West Coast ports between the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) had expired. The PMA was able to continue operations at the ports for more than a year after the contract expired in the summer of 2022 thanks to the ILWU.

The union's collaboration allowed the PMA ample time and opportunity to redirect cargo to the East Coast, limiting the power of any potential strike by 22,000 West Coast dockworkers. Another key role was played by the ILA, which forced its members to handle the increase in volume.

The drying up of work on the West Coast had disastrous consequences for dockworkers there, with many of their lowest tiered workers, such as casuals and B-men, reporting that collapsing trade volumes made getting work nearly impossible.

At the time, the financial elite also urged the Biden administration to intervene at the West Coast docks

when “labor uncertainty” among the West Coast docks were at an all-time high.

A letter from the spring of 2023 read: “As we have witnessed, significant cargo flows have shifted away from the West Coast ports because of the uncertainty related to the labor negotiations,” the letter stated. “... many cargo interests have expressly stated that they shifted cargo as a result of the negotiations. *That cargo will not return to the West Coast until after a contract is final and approved by both parties.* [Emphasis added] The longer there is no ratified contract only increases the probability that some portion of the freight will never return to the West Coast ports.”

When West Coast dockworkers rebelled last year through a series of wildcat actions, the Biden administration responded by dispatching acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, who rapidly worked out a deal which the ILWU then rammed through as quickly as possible.

This should be a stark warning to all 45,000 East and Gulf Coast dockworkers under the ILA. They are determined for a real fight. But the ILA bureaucracy, for all of its bluster, as well as the ILWU have allowed corporate America to make preparations for a strike for months, without any serious opposition.

Last month ILWU President Willie Adams sent ILA President Harold Daggett a letter expressing “solidarity” with the ILA membership and their potential strike. But this is disingenuous, given the fact that the ILWU bureaucrats are forcing West Coast dockworkers to shoulder the load of traffic diverted from the East Coast. What rank-and-file dockworkers need are not militant slogans and sham “solidarity” spewed out by bureaucrats such as Adams and Daggett.

What is really needed for East Coast dockworkers to win a fair contract is the authentic unity of the working class, especially with other workers outside of the docks.

In a recent statement, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) declared, “Dockworkers have immense power,” but “the key question which they confront is how to use [it]. Establishing lines of communication with workers in other strategic industries, they must build their struggle into a broad counteroffensive by the working class against worsening conditions and automation-driven layoffs.”

It continued: “East Coast dockworkers must follow the Boeing workers’ example and form a Dockworkers Rank-and-File Committee of their own. They must be prepared to leverage the power of the working class against sellout maneuvering by the ILA bureaucracy.”

We call on East Coast dockworkers and dockworkers everywhere to take a principled stand not only against the major corporations at the docks but against the trade union bureaucrats who work with the corporations and the government to keep workers isolated and strikes limited.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact