

“We run everything”: East Coast dockworkers defiant on eve of contract expiration

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Dockworkers: Tell us what you're fighting for by filling out the form below! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

With a contract covering 45,000 US East and Gulf Coast dockworkers expiring midnight Monday, the rank-and-file is determined to carry out a strike to defend jobs and working conditions. A strike would stretch across 36 ports from Maine to Houston, Texas and shut down five of the 10 busiest ports in the continent.

Most importantly, the strike would rally workers across North America and the world to fight against exploitation. It would intersect with a strike by 33,000 Boeing machinists who rejected a sellout deal by 95 percent, a strike which has already expanded to 5,000 Textron Aviation and 500 Eaton Aerospace workers. In Canada, dockworkers are prepared to conduct a three-day strike in Montreal, the country's largest port in the east.

Boeing workers, having rebelled against the union bureaucracy's attempt to ram through a last-minute sellout, have formed the Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee to enforce democratic control of the strike and link up with other sections of the working class for support. A statement of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to which the Boeing committee is affiliated, issued a statement last week urging dockworkers to do the same.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration is centrally involved in trying to limit or block a strike. Last week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, acting Labor Secretary Julie Su and Director of the National Economic Council Lael Brainard met with port operators and communicated with ILA officials insisting on a resolution. While the White House tries to deny it, its intervention against railroaders in 2022 shows there is a real danger they will try to issue an injunction against dockworkers.

Over the last few days, the WSWs spoke with port workers in the northeastern United States about what their demands are. Their names have been changed to protect their identity.

Miranda, who has worked as both a straddle carrier and Class A CDL said of work on the docks, “It's a no-joke job. It's a sacrifice job. It's hard work. You see how big the machines are?”

Patrick, a lasher who works on the ships tying down shipping containers went into more detail: “Scheduling is all over the place. That's the toughest thing as a dockworker. There's demand for constant work, which has picked up quite tremendously. The ships

come in at all hours of the day, which is one of the toughest things to deal with. You come in in the morning or at night.

“I'm a lasher, so we work in all weather, even if it's raining on us. The ships can be dangerous. Some of these rust buckets that come in can be pretty crazy. A lot of people get hurt on them all the time, lashers especially.”

Jay added: “The machines are not fully safe. Waking up at 4:30 in the morning and working all night, then coming back and having four hours of sleep most nights, you don't see your kids, you don't eat right. That's just what it is.”

Hazardous working conditions, wages not keeping pace with inflation and the defense of jobs are the key issues on workers' minds.

“With all the inflation, we want our pay to go up. ... With inflation, everything goes up,” Patrick said. “If you think you make great money, but all of a sudden inflation happens, your money suddenly isn't that great anymore. What you saved by coming in busting your ass every day is now not that much. You keep chasing the proverbial carrot thinking, ‘Ok, you just have to work more to get to that point where I can relax and rest,’ but that's always a tough thing.”

“[We want] a livable wage,” said Jay, “When the world shut down during COVID, we worked, sick and all. We got people sick. We took COVID back home to our families. We still had to work to keep America running and now it's like we don't even matter. ... The companies profited about \$300 billion these last few years since COVID, while we're working sick and working hours around the clock.”

Ray, another dockworker, expressed similar sentiments. “We've been down for the past six years. And we really got screwed when COVID happened. A lot of us put our lives on the line, a lot of us passed away. I believe we need fairness because we're the ones who kept the world going when we were in a crisis. And they're [the companies] making billions. Billion dollar bonuses. So it's about time.”

Another dockworker proclaimed, “What we need is a contract, one that is good, good for longshoremen, against inflation. The companies are making billions of dollars. They need to give more of it to the guys working day and night. We need wages, more wages, decent wages.”

Miranda expressed widespread concern over automation and

other new technologies. “I think automation is inevitable. I think some people, the people that just started here, they’re probably not going to get to have a career for 20 or 30 years. Do we need to get into a different field? It’s going to affect people here because the amount of people that they need now won’t be the amount of people that they need when automation takes over.”

Ray added: “automation is going to take a lot of jobs from a lot of people. Or even new people coming in, like me bringing in my kids in, my sons and my nephews and stuff like that. They might not have that opportunity that’s been going on for generation after generation. Automation isn’t helping us in the long run, it’s helping them [the companies].”

Patrick continued, “We’re afraid of automation, everyone wants to hold on to their job. If automation comes in, there’s fear that [the companies] will just do what they want. I’ve talked to a lot of deckhands that travel on the cargo ships. They say automation is actually slower and more dangerous for them as workers on the ships.”

“Protecting workers is one of our biggest things,” said Jay. “It’s not that we’re lazy, we’re trying to protect American jobs from automation. Robots come in here, how are me and you going to eat?”

A dockworker who grabbed a WSWs leaflet while driving by in his car said, “When you put all the people on the street, who’s going to buy all the damn merchandise?! That’s what they’re doing to us. It’s ridiculous.”

While the International Longshoremen’s Association has been compelled by rank-and-file anger to promise to strike if a deal is not in place by the end of Monday, ILA President Harold Daggett has also pledged to keep ILA workers handling military cargo during a strike, including shipments bound for Israel and Ukraine, where US-backed wars are on the brink of major escalations.

Incredibly, Daggett favorably cited the bureaucrats’ role in blocking strikes during the first two World Wars, declaring: “Dating back to World War 1, the ILA was always proud to note that ‘ILA Also Means Love America’ when it came to its ‘No Strike Pledge’ in handling U.S. military cargo at all its ports.”

The ILA’s Military Consultant, Gen. (Ret.) Tim McHale confirmed that the American government is “very happy and satisfied with the ILA.”

However, the sentiments of rank-and-file workers are far removed from the the patriotic warmongering of the ILA bureaucracy. Patrick responded to Daggett’s pledge, “I don’t know what I think about that, but obviously weapons aren’t essential goods. ... I haven’t had the time to really spend to figure out what is what [in regards to funding Ukraine war], but initially I thought we shouldn’t pay for that and pay for the situation here [in the US]. I’m sure there’s all kinds of political side-deals going on...”

On the Israeli genocide, Patrick declared: “I definitely don’t agree with that. Netanyahu is out of his mind. I hear a lot of Israelis are unhappy with him because he’s a maniac and extra right wing.”

A port trucker who expressed support for the dockworkers denounced war. “[Both political parties] get their money from the billionaires. They are bringing us closer than ever to another world

war.”

Another dockworker spoke on the overall political situation. “The people running the country are not the best. Look at Biden, when the ship knocked down the bridge in Baltimore, Biden said, ‘My hands are tied.’ Dockworkers in Baltimore lost their jobs. It is all about who is running the country.”

Miranda also addressed the opposition among workers to the political set up, “The people you vote in, the people that are making the laws, that are in charge and making this much money up there, but what we make is down here. And if you’re going to make the laws that favor the people up there instead of the workers, that’s when you got to say, ‘Who’s in charge? Who’s making the laws that say we care more about these people up there than we care about you?’”

Workers strongly supported a united struggle of the working class.

Ray declared, “We need to come together as workers. When we unite, we’re a family and that’s the only way we’re able to fight. I’ve always believed that’s the thing to do.”

Carlos, a veteran truck driver at the port, said: “If the strike happens, we [truckers] should also stop and comply with the whole thing. Let me put it this way: If Tesla said tomorrow, we’re going to bring out automated trucks without a driver, what am I going to do? It’s the same thing [with dockworkers] ... You have to be united. We have to.”

Another truck driver declared, “I support the longshoremen. I would not drive through their picket lines. They want more hours but do not want to pay more money. We run everything. We need to get together. The dock workers don’t want anything they haven’t worked for.”

Responding to the role of the Biden administration in the struggle of dockworkers, one worker said, “The government stepped in on the West Coast. They could here, too.” A veteran dockworker of 22 years, proclaimed, “If they want war, we, dockworkers, will give them a war, I promise you.”



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