

East and Gulf coasts dock strike part of growing rebellion by the working class

Tom Hall

1 October 2024

The strike that began Tuesday by 45,000 dockworkers is a major milestone in a growing offensive by the working class. The strike has shut 36 ports in the East and Gulf coasts, including major ports such as New York-New Jersey, Houston, Savannah and Charleston.

The walkout is part of a growing nationwide rebellion. Dockworkers have joined 33,000 Boeing workers who have been on strike for more than two weeks following the rejection of a sellout contract, along with thousands more aerospace workers at Textron and Eaton. All told, at least 85,000 workers are on strike in the United States in key strategic workplaces.

This is part of a global movement. Canadian dockworkers in Montreal have launched a 72-hour strike, raising the prospect of a continent-wide movement.

This strike wave has erupted only weeks before the November presidential election, when the trade union bureaucracy usually enforces a de facto strike ban.

Official politics, driven by increasingly desperate attempts to shore up the position of American capitalism, is plumbing the depths through massive military escalations in the Middle East and against Russia. The Trump campaign represents a significant effort to establish a fascist dictatorship in the United States.

But an entirely different, progressive social force is emerging in opposition: the working class. The strike wave poses both the urgent need, as well as the possibility, of an independent class movement directed against the capitalist profit system as a whole.

The conditions dockworkers are fighting against are universal, from the profit-driven indifference to safety, stagnant and declining real wages, and massive overwork. Above all, dockworkers are fighting to defend their jobs against new forms of automation. These are being weaponized by corporations all over the planet to reduce whole sections of the working class to poverty. In the US alone, tens of thousands of jobs have already been

destroyed this year in the auto industry, at UPS, the tech sector and other workplaces in this way.

The docks have long been central to the ruling class's use of labor-saving technologies to slash jobs. The introduction of containerization beginning in the 1960s not only destroyed tens of thousands of dock jobs but massively reduced shipping costs. It was also instrumental in the globalization of capitalist production and ever-greater interconnection of a growing international working class. In a different social system not dominated by profit, these technological developments would be used to ease the burden of work and sharply improve living standards.

A battle is underway over who controls these new technologies: the working class or the corporate elite. A comment yesterday in the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post* nervously warned that the dock strike is only “an early battle of well-paid workers against advanced automation. There will be many more to come.”

The strike is also part of a growing rebellion against the pro-corporate union apparatus, which has spent decades helping force concessions down workers' throats, and which is totally connected with the capitalist state. The current strike wave began with a massive rejection of an attempted sellout at Boeing by the International Association of Machinists bureaucracy, which workers rejected by a staggering 95 percent.

This has severely complicated the attempts by bureaucrats across the country to impose their own sellouts. For all of the International Longshoremen's Association's angry and vulgar rhetoric, the bureaucracy has been thrown into crisis. The real driving force of this strike is not union President Harold Daggett but the rank-and-file.

The strike is also a blow to the Biden White House. For years, the self-described “most pro-labor president in US history” has used the services of the bureaucracy to block

or limit strikes and impose contracts which green-light job cuts and impose sub-inflation wages. The White House also sees the bureaucracy as central to preparing the home front for war, summed up in Biden's recent declaration that the AFL-CIO is his "domestic NATO."

The ILA bureaucracy has pledged to continue moving military equipment through the strikebound ports. These are being used in Israel's US-backed genocide in Gaza and expanding war against Iran, and to support a proxy war against Russia that threatens mankind with nuclear annihilation. Biden has issued a statement blaming "foreign" shipping lines for provoking the strike in an effort to divert attention from Wall Street and US capitalism.

But the outbreak of strikes at defense contractor Boeing and on the docks, at the same time that US imperialism is escalating its wars in the Middle East and against Russia, shows that the efforts to suppress the class struggle with appeals to American nationalism and militarism are beginning to break down. Biden's attempts to use the union bureaucracy to impose his program has increasingly discredited both in the eyes of the working class.

That is because the same profit interests behind imperialist war—the struggle for control of raw materials, markets and pools of cheap labor—are behind the war on the jobs and living standards of workers at home. Regardless of who wins the presidential race, both parties are committed to make the working class pay for these wars.

Biden is claiming he has no intention of using a Taft-Hartley injunction to force an end to the strike, but the bipartisan strike ban in 2022 on the railroads proves the government is thoroughly prepared to use force to shut down the strike if it is not able to get it under control through the union bureaucracy.

The key question facing dockworkers is the development of their strike into a broad-based independent movement of the working class. In particular, they confront two pressing tasks: first, to enforce democratic control over their own struggle, including control over all future contract talks and the ability to countermand decisions which violate their will; and second, the establishment of real lines of communication with rank-and-file workers across the country and the world.

This requires the development of rank-and-file strike committees, composed solely of trusted workers and independent of the ILA bureaucracy. Boeing workers have already taken this step, as have railroaders and

others across industries around the world. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), they are able to coordinate and collaborate with workers all over the world.

The ILA is already attempting to quarantine dockworkers by heavily policing the picket lines and social media. Meanwhile, Daggett and the ILA bureaucrats are joining forces with their counterparts on the West Coast from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which is forcing its members to scab on the strike by handling diverted cargo.

Striking dockworkers must break through the coastal divide and link up with workers on the West Coast, who support their struggle. They must also reach out to railroaders, who are battling new sellout contracts, who are key to plans to move diverted cargo back to the East Coast.

They must also reach out to workers across North America and the world to prevent cargo from being diverted to Mexico and Canada. Last year, Mexican truckers blocked the ports and workers below the border are eager to join with their cousins to the north to fight the multinational corporations, which oppress them both.

In opposition to the ILA bureaucracy's support for America's wars for global domination, rank-and-file workers must take active measures to stop war. In particular, they must heed the call by the Palestinian trade unions, which have urged workers around the world to halt the genocide by refusing to handle military shipments to Israel.

Dockworkers are in a fight not just against the port operators but an entire social system—capitalism, which is based on exploitation and inequality. Against the capitalist ruling class, workers must counterpose their own political program—socialism, based on the transfer of political power to the working class, the abolition of the profit motive and the running of society for human need.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact