

After shutdown of strike, port operators determined to implement automation on East Coast and Gulf Coast docks

Erik Schreiber
10 October 2024

Following the shutdown of a three-day strike by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) without a tentative agreement, the US Maritime Alliance (USMX) is determined to introduce automation at ports along the East Coast and Gulf Coast of the United States.

When the strike was shut down on the basis of a 90-day extension of the previous deal, the WSWs characterized it as “[riding] to the rescue of the Biden administration to ensure the flow of weapons for America’s global wars.” There is every possibility of a new war breaking out with Iran in the coming weeks, and plans are well advanced to green-light unrestricted missile strikes against Russia, raising the prospect of nuclear war.

The ILA justified its decision to end the strike and extend the last agreement by claiming that it gives negotiators the “space” to hash out terms on automation and other key issues. In reality, the bureaucracy is tying workers’ hands as corporate America pushes for massive job cuts.

An editorial published on Monday in the *Wall Street Journal*, which is the organ of the corporate and financial oligarchy, makes the ocean carriers’ position clear.

Noting that the carriers have reaped record profits during the pandemic, Peter Tirschwell concedes in his editorial that they can afford to pay the 62 percent raise on which USMX and the ILA verbally agreed. But he states categorically that the carriers cannot afford to forego automation. Indeed, “the US economy” and “US trade competitiveness” cannot afford a ban on automation at the ports, Tirschwell adds. The thinly veiled objection is that the profits of the corporations and their shareholders would suffer.

To justify the push for automation, Tirschwell quotes USMX directly. “It is critical that terminals have the capability to densify as American consumer demand and exports continue to rise,” the group told the administration of President Joe Biden. “There is not enough land or berth capacity in US ports to handle future trade growth without implementing new technology.” Although few new US ports have been built in recent years, automation would enable cargo to be handled more quickly at existing ports, thus increasing their capacity,

Tirschwell writes.

Across the world, automation, artificial intelligence and other new technologies are already being used to slash millions of jobs. This includes plans at UPS to close or automate 200 facilities at UPS, where, like the ILA, the Teamsters claimed “victory” on wages in a new contract last year, only for tens of thousands to lose their jobs.

A similar process is underway at the US Postal Service under the “Delivering for America” reorganization plan. And in the auto industry, thousands have lost their jobs this year, and hundreds of thousands more will be axed in the coming years as the industry shifts towards less labor-intensive electric vehicles.

Automation and class war

Automation, in and of itself, could be used to ease the burden of work, fund wage and benefit increases and more efficiently manufacture and move goods to those who need them the most. But under capitalism, this technology is being weaponized as one part of a three-part plan to break the growing resistance of the working class through mass job cuts. A survey at the start of the year found around 40 percent of US business leaders, who expected layoffs this year in their industry, cited automation as a key factor.

The second part of this is the use of the union bureaucracy to limit or sabotage strikes and impose sellouts. The Biden White House’s direct intervention to shut down the dock strike is only the latest in a series of betrayals coordinated between the unions and the government. On Thursday, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg issued marching orders for an end to the strike by 33,000 Boeing workers, declaring that with “each passing day it becomes more important ... for them to come to terms.”

The third and final part has been a policy of heightened interest rates, modeled after the “Volcker Shock” of the 1970s. However, this policy is breaking down because the entire

financial system is heavily reliant on cheap money, meaning corporate America is compelled to rely more heavily on both automation and the sellout union bureaucrats.

Even while Tirschwell lays out plans for massive automation, he paints the ILA in militant colors, citing its leaders' demand for "absolute, airtight language that there will be no automation or semiautomation." But the ILA sabotaged workers' leverage by ending the strike. That signaled the ILA bureaucracy's unwillingness to threaten the carriers' profits in any serious way.

Dockworkers speak out

Dockworkers at Port Newark in New Jersey recognize that they have not yet achieved victory. Several expressed their disgust at the ILA's ending of the strike. "There is no contract ... and we don't get anything until a contract is signed," one worker told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"We have nothing," another dockworker said flatly.

A checker spoke about the ILA's behind-the-scenes political machinations. "It is an 'election' contract being pushed because the ILA leaders don't want to embarrass Biden and [Vice President Kamala] Harris during an election or disrupt the transport of materials to the war," he said. The contract "is like the election [itself] because nothing will improve much for us after we have it. The union is not telling us anything."

The worker also described the difficult conditions that he faces, as well as the looming threat to him and his coworkers. "They want to automate checkers' jobs like they do that of the machine operators. In some ways, the job of a checker is harder than [that of] the operators because they have changes in what they are doing outside, but we are stuck behind the screen for 12 hours. I work 12, sometimes 16 hours a day, and I have an hour and a half driving my commute. I sleep seven hours, so that generally leaves me three hours to be awake and do what I need to for myself."

Though they faced a loss of work during the strike, truckers told the WSWS that they supported it. "We, all workers, need to fight," said one. "And we need a different way to fight."

"We need to all be together," another trucker agreed.

The case of Stephen Sweeney

The ILA officials, including President Harold Daggett, are not uniting with dockworkers and truckers but with the Democratic Party. In comments to the *New Jersey Globe*, Daggett credited Stephen Sweeney, a Democratic politician and

gubernatorial candidate in New Jersey, with helping to end the strike.

Sweeney served in the New Jersey Senate from 2002 to 2022. From 2008 to 2010, he was its Majority Leader. He has a long record of defending corporate interests against those of the working class.

In 2002, Sweeney sponsored a law that enabled municipalities to establish Project Labor Agreements, which prohibit strikes and lockouts, when they begin construction projects. In 2006, Sweeney endorsed cuts of as much as 15 percent to state workers' salaries and benefits. When the state government shut down that year, he told state workers not to collect pay for the time that they were furloughed, adding that he would have voted against the state budget had he realized that it allowed workers to do this. In 2011, Sweeney proposed "reforms" that he said would cut over \$120 billion from the public employee pension and health benefits systems over 30 years.

Sweeney is also the general vice president of the Iron Workers Union. He joined the union in 1977 and has served in its leadership for decades. Like many other unions, the Iron Workers has a record of corruption. Between 1999 and 2002, nine of the union's top officials were investigated or indicted. In the latter year, Jake West, the union's international president, pleaded guilty to misuse of pension funds and filing a false report with the US Department of Labor.

East Coast and Gulf Coast dockworkers cannot afford to leave the initiative in the hands of traitors like Daggett and Sweeney. These figures are working behind the scenes to draft an agreement that is amenable to the ocean carriers—one that will ensure the uninterrupted flow of arms for Israel's genocide and for the proxy war with Russia in Ukraine.

Winning the necessary raises and protections against automation will require dockworkers to form independent-rank-and-file committees that are outside the ILA's control. The formation of such committees is the first step to waging a determined fight for workers' needs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact