

Contract talks for US East Coast dockworkers breaks down two days after restart

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Dockworkers: Tell us what you think about the talks and what you are fighting for by filling out the form below! All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Contract negotiations between the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the US Maritime Alliance (USMX) broke down last week after only two days. The key issue in the negotiations to establish a new master contract for the East and Gulf Coast docks is automation, which companies are using to slash jobs and increase profits. For the moment, talks are on hold.

In a statement last week, the ILA said that “talks broke down when management introduced their intent to implement semi-automation — a direct contradiction to their opening statement, where they assured us that neither full nor semi-automation would be on the table.” USMX seeks to establish semi-automation in the new contract as a first step toward full automation in the future. Other unresolved issues include healthcare benefits for ILA members and retirees and container royalties.

The breakdown of talks is an exposure of the supposed “victory” declared by the ILA after shutting down a three day strike by 45,000 workers in October. The strike was shut down without a tentative agreement. Instead, the union apparatus touted a verbal agreement with USMX on a 62 percent pay raise as a victory and sent longshoremen back to work. The question of automation, along with all other questions, was left to be resolved after a 90 day extension of the old deal, which expires on January 15.

Dockworkers have vented their frustration with this betrayal on social media. “Now we got a new president coming in who, based on who he is saying is gonna be in his administration (Elon [Musk]), isn't gonna be sympathetic to our fight against automation,” wrote one

worker. “We agreed to revisit things after the inauguration ... but it sure seems like we have a much worse negotiating position now.” The worker ruefully pointed to the ILA's role. “Seems like we got [betrayed] by the guys at the top who agreed to end the strike. We missed our opportunity!”

“There's so much more at stake and needing negotiations,” another worker commented. “Getting pensions back, only allowing AI [artificial intelligence] cameras in trucks to be monitored for incidental issues, container royalty....” The worker cited USMX's double-dealing on the question of automation as a reason for the strike. “It's time for the longshoremen to finally get what they're entitled to and stop settling for low deal bargains, this is what union dues are paid for!!!”

Despite his foul-mouthed tirades and feigned militancy, ILA President Harold Daggett sought to end the strike at the first opportunity. The stoppage that began on October 1 was the first strike at East and Gulf Coast ports in almost 50 years; the ILA leadership has helped the operators slash jobs and suppress wages for decades.

With an annual salary of nearly \$1 million, Daggett inhabits an entirely different social world than do the longshoremen he claims to represent. His material interests coincide with those of the carriers rather than those of the workers. Daggett would have prevented the recent strike entirely had not workers' anger been so great.

To suspend the strike, Daggett collaborated not only with USMX, but also with the Biden administration. Through acting Secretary of Labor Julie Su, Biden was intimately involved in negotiations. One reason for this involvement is that about half of the country's ocean shipping flows through the East and Gulf Coast docks, making them vital to the US economy.

The ports are also essential to the war plans of US imperialism. One of Biden's central priorities has been the shipment of arms to Ukraine for NATO's proxy war against Russia. Another has been the continued supply of matériel to Israel as it commits genocide against the Palestinians, murders civilians in Lebanon and Syria and prepares for war against Iran. Determined to prevent a serious disruption to these wars and to the accumulation of corporate profit, Biden worked closely with the ILA and USMX to end the strike quickly.

The new January 15 deadline is only five days before the inauguration of President-Elect Donald Trump. Should talks fail and dockworkers resume their strike, Trump would be presented immediately with his first domestic crisis.

During the presidential campaign, Trump took advantage of the Democrats' utter indifference to mass economic suffering to posture as a friend of workers. But Trump's election represents at bottom a violent realignment of the US political system with massive levels of inequality in the country.

His cabinet nominees, including Marco Rubio as secretary of state and Pete Hegseth as secretary of defense, make plain that Trump will pursue a policy of imperialist war that will be funded through unprecedented cuts to education and social programs. Moreover, Trump's nomination of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a notorious promoter of quackery and opponent of vaccines, indicates that he plans a frontal assault on public health, even as the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic persists and the danger of H5N1 grows.

The ILA leadership will continue collaborating with Biden, and, if necessary, Trump to prevent a resumption of the strike or, failing that, to betray it as quickly as possible. Although the ILA did not endorse a presidential candidate, Daggett met with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida last fall. Daggett said that Trump "promised to support the ILA in its opposition to automated terminals." What this really means is that the ILA bureaucracy is prepared to work with Trump to crush rank-and-file opposition from below.

To prevent the betrayal that is being prepared behind closed doors, longshoremen must seize the initiative from the ILA leadership. Taking this step will require workers to organize a rank-and-file committee that is independent of the union apparatus and of both

capitalist parties. In this way, dockworkers can control their own struggle democratically and coordinate their actions along the East and Gulf Coasts.

The intervention of the government in their struggle and the speed with which the strike was suspended in October reflect the tremendous power in dockworkers' hands. They can gain even more support by reaching out to Canadian dockworkers, who now face binding arbitration after Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ordered them back to work last week to protect corporate profits. The East and Gulf Coast workers' struggle is not only international, but also fundamentally political. It is inseparable from the fight to end the subordination of human life to profit and from the struggle for workers' control over the economy.



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