

# Talks restart for US East Coast docks contract

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*Dockworkers: tell us what you think about the contract talks by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

Talks officially re-started Tuesday between the US Maritime Association (USMX) and the International Longshoremen's Association over the labor agreement covering over 40,000 dockworkers on the US East and Gulf Coasts.

The talks begin only eight days before a contract extension is set to expire on January 15, raising the possibility of renewed strike action. A three-day strike in October was abruptly shut down by the ILA bureaucracy following a White House intervention, which secured a 90-day extension of the old deal in exchange for a promised 62 percent pay increase. However, no agreement has been reached on workers' main demand of job security in the face of new automated technologies.

The strike in October showed the massive power of the working class, sending waves of panic within ruling circles. The potential of a new strike next week, only five days before the inauguration of Donald Trump, underscores the enormous class conflict which will erupt as a consequence of the policies of the fascist administration.

Workers can win their demands, but it requires building rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the ILA apparatus to workers themselves. This must be connected with a global strategy of uniting with other sections of the working class, including dockworkers in every country as well as railroaders and other workers in key supply chains.

While the earlier agreement left the main issues unresolved, the 62 percent wage increase encouraged resistance from other sections of the working class. This included Boeing workers, who were then on strike, and railroaders fighting sellout deals of their own. No section of the working class is in the mood to accept even more concessions.

The corporate press is full of worried comments about the potential impact of a strike not only on profits but on opposition in the working class. The docks contract is the first of "nearly 200 large union contracts ... set to expire in 2025 ... [covering] more than 1.5 million workers," Bloomberg Law reports. A major issue will be a "push for novel job protections from emerging technology like artificial intelligence."

According to the article, other major contracts include:

- 18,000 Costco workers whose contract expires at the end of the month;
- 22,000 Kroger grocery workers;
- 52,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente; and
- 33,000 voice actors and singers from the SAG-AFTRA union.

The docks and other contracts will be a test of whether Trump will be able to continue the role of his predecessor Biden in intervening to

prevent or shut down strikes, Bloomberg continues, citing recent contracts at Boeing, Kaiser and the auto industry. The business outlet fails to mention that these contracts have paved the way for massive cuts and layoffs. The Biden White House relied heavily on its allies in the union bureaucracy to impose concessions, isolate strikes if they erupted and block a broader mobilization of the working class against the corporations and the government.

The union bureaucracy is now flocking to Trump, especially after the collapse of their previous Democratic Party patrons, supporting in particular his nationalist, right-wing populist rhetoric. Trump's appointment of Lori Chavez-DeRemer as Labor Secretary, one of a handful of Republicans who back the PRO Act, which the union executives see as key to their interests, suggests that Biden's essentially right-wing corporatist labor policy will accelerate.

Last month, Trump made a social media post denouncing "foreign" shipping companies as the cause of port automation. The statement was enthusiastically endorsed by ILA President Harold Daggett and Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien. In reality, Trump, whose new cabinet is staffed with oligarchs like Elon Musk, uses this rhetoric to lull workers while it prepares sweeping attacks on both their standard of living and democratic rights.

## Secret contract meeting held

The bureaucracy is terrified of rank-and-file opposition, which has only grown since the contract extension and the ILA's open alignment with Trump. Thus far, it has used militant-sounding rhetoric as cover while it closes ranks with the port operators and the government. Its aim is to impose a contract favorable to the operators and Wall Street which paves the way for mass layoffs, while securing its own financial and institutional interests.

CNBC reported that ILA and USMX officials held a secret eight-hour meeting on Sunday focusing on automation. "According to a document reviewed by CNBC," the report continued, "the agreement states that the ILA reserves the right to add union workers in the future to complement any new technologies and 'there is a commitment by the parties to research and utilize all technology that would assist an operator in being more efficient and productive.'"

In other words, behind the appearance of "conflict," the two parties are conspiring to impose another pro-corporate contract. The ILA is drawing directly from the Teamsters playbook in 2023, when it used hot air about a "strike ready" campaign to market a contract at UPS as

the product of “hard bargaining.” That contract is being used by management to close or automate 200 UPS facilities and lay off tens of thousands.

While not mentioned in the CNBC report, there is no doubt that both Biden and Trump representatives are involved in the talks.

Industry outlet gCaptain, impatient with the ILA’s grandstanding, poured cold water on its public stance on automation by pointing out that the union had already agreed to it in previous contracts: “The two prior master contracts (2012 and 2018) that Harold Daggett negotiated focused on shoring up semi-automation and automation deployment language.

“In the final version of the 2012 Master Contract, Article Eleven Section One established the New Technology and Automation Committee[:]

“Where new devices and new methods are utilized or additional automation is implemented, it is recognized that these make the ILA more competitive and their employers more able to provide continued employment. In conjunction with this, the ILA and USMX agree to establish a New Technology and Automation Committee, consisting of the Co-Chairmen and five (5) additional members from each side.’

“...Those familiar with the automation pushback this round of negotiations tell gCaptain that Daggett is trying to stop what he and his committee members previously approved.”

### **Union bureaucrats back fascism and war**

A rank-and-file rebellion against the bureaucracy is bound up with the inevitable struggle of the working class against the fascist policies of the new Trump government. While the bureaucrats are lining up with Trump, workers will be compelled to fight against his threats against democratic rights and the launching of new wars.

The political basis of the bureaucracy’s support for Trump has been laid over decades by its nationalism, support for US imperialism and vicious anticommunism. Over the weekend, the ILA bureaucrats summed up their outlook when it denounced an article in *Workers Vanguard*, the newspaper of the Spartacist League, which criticized its shutdown of the October strike.

The Spartacist League, a pseudo-left middle class group which broke with Trotskyism in the 1960s, is a convenient and soft target. In choosing to respond to them, the ILA is really attacking all left-wing opposition to the bureaucracy, especially from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In his statement, ILA Executive Vice President Dennis Daggett, the highly paid son of the union’s president, claims that the ILA bureaucrats are not “patting themselves on the back,” but are “busy doing the work—fighting to secure a new Master Contract that covers members from Maine to Texas.” This amounted to an admission, later confirmed by CNBC, that they have been involved in secret talks behind the backs of their members.

Daggett denounces the charge that the ILA leaders’ decision to continue moving military cargo undermined the October strike. “We are patriots first. The ILA will never take actions that harm our troops or our country. The safety and security of the nation remain our top priorities,” Daggett insists.

At the time, the WSWs wrote:

The ILA bureaucracy felt compelled to ride to the rescue of the Biden administration and ensure the flow of weapons for America’s global wars. Having already pledged to continue moving military equipment during the strike, the union apparatus was eager to prove to the political establishment that it can be relied upon to enforce order on the “home front.”

It is impossible to oppose corporate attacks on workers in the US while backing the wars waged by Wall Street, which have killed or maimed millions of workers and poor in every other part of the world. The ILA’s embrace of “national unity” for war conceals the fact that these wars, including the genocide in Gaza and proxy war in Ukraine, are being fought to secure markets, supply chains and natural resources for US corporations. That is, the same corporations that are waging war against the working class at home.

The ruling class regularly uses “national security” as an excuse to ban strikes and rip up democratic rights at home, as the Biden White House did when it banned a rail strike in 2022.

These attacks will assume a far wider scale under Trump, whom the ILA bureaucrats support. The same day that talks restarted, Trump issued a threat to use the military to annex Greenland, the Panama Canal and Canada. His camp has drawn up plans to expel millions of immigrants, many of whom work on the docks and other key industries, as a spearhead to establish an American dictatorship.

Workers must reject the divisive nationalist poison from the ILA bureaucrats, which undermines their struggle by disrupting their global unity and subordinating them to right-wing capitalist politics. By joining the fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) they can assert their independence against the entire corporate elite, the political establishment and their lackeys in the union bureaucracy, and build a global movement uniting with the real allies in the working class around the world.



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