

International dockworker unions gather in Durban

written by Lyse Comins

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A delegation from the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) will attend the 1973 Durban Strikes Conference in Durban. ILWU photo: Steve Zeltzer

A delegation of international and local dockworker trade unions and academics have descended on Durban to mark the anniversary of the 1973 Durban strikes that

preceded the formation of South Africa's powerful trade union movement.

Trade union representatives from the United States-based International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) and Namibia will gather in the city with international and local activists, academics, and leaders of the Revolutionary Transport Union of South Africa (Retusa) and the General Industries Workers Union of South Africa to tackle issues currently facing dockworkers, at the [1973 Durban Strikes Conference from January 26-28.](#)

Academic and historically focused sessions will take place at the Durban University of Technology, and union and academic discussions and a photographic exhibition of the 1973 strikes and dock struggles in Durban and Oakland will be held at the BAT Centre on the Esplanade.

The event marks the 50th anniversary of the strikes, which saw some 100 000 African and Indian workers downing tools to demand better wages and working conditions, impacting more than 100 firms - from textile and brick factories to metal and chemical plants. The strikes were followed by the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions in 1979 and the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985, which played a pivotal role in the liberation struggle against Apartheid.

In 1984 members of the ILWU Bay Area's branches, Locals 10 and 34, refused to offload South African cargo for 11 days, inspiring local residents to join the US anti-apartheid movement.

ILWU Local 10 retired Secretary-Treasurer, Clarence Thomas, speaking at a media briefing ahead of the conference on Tuesday, said dockworkers held a strategic position of power to wield influence on how governments managed their economies.

"Dockworkers have more leverage than any workers in the world, being at the point of the global supply chain, because when we shut down - rail, trucking, cargo flight

schedules – the food we eat, the fuel we put into cars, computers, handheld devices, and the shoes we wear, all come off a ship. There are no workers in the world that understand capitalism better than longshore workers because before the cargo can be stored it has to come off that ship – and if we don't load and offload it, nothing is going to happen,” he said.

ILWU said in a statement that it would hold an exchange with local unions to focus on how unions can work together to organize and carry out international dockworker blockades against ships and “how to fight the privatisation of public services.”

Retusa general secretary, Joseph Dube, welcomed the collaboration between unions.

“We are fighting privatisation as you are. We need to learn from each other and make our unions an active fighting force for permanent jobs, democratic workers' control over the harbour facilities, and above all to fight for a living wage for all,” Dube said.

Conference sessions and discussions will include a review of historical mass strikes against capitalism, trade unions and economic policy, foreign investment and labor rights, how to fight privatization, how to organize mass worker parties, and how to tackle the future challenges of the release of political prisoners, pandemics, war and peace, and climate change.

SA History Online is hosting the conference in partnership with the Durban University of Technology, Wits History Workshop, University of Fort Hare, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of Cape Town Department of Sociology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Chris Hani Institute, and Workers College based in Durban.



International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 retired Secretary-Treasurer Clarence Thomas addressed the media ahead of the conference this week. ILWU photo: Steve Zeltzer

Source: [South Africa Freight News](#)

