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Longshore workers to review proposed union contract

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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ILWU Local 10 members shut down the ports of Oakland and San Francisco on Feb. 16 to demand that political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal be given a new trial. Clarence Thomas, left, speaking Feb. 16, 2023.

In June, the union contract dispute between 22,000 longshore workers in 29 ports on

the West Coast — members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) — and the port bosses — the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) — began to heat up.

ILWU members, angry that they had gone over a year without a contract, began to take steps to make their dissatisfaction known. It was then that they finally began hearing some results. On June 12, ILWU President Willie Adams announced to members of his union that the Longshore Caucus, the highest governing body of elected delegates, was preparing to review the terms of a contract just negotiated with the PMA.

Adams said: “We will discuss, we will debate and then at that point [the Longshore Caucus] will decide if this comes to you — the rank and file. We will be going through the contract and you’ll be asking questions. You’ll be debating it in our fair and true democratic process and you will vote it up, or you will vote it down.”

Overriding the democratic process of the union, the big business-controlled media leaked reports meant to strengthen the hand of the bosses in negotiations. The Wall Street Journal reported some terms of the proposed agreement as if it were a done deal and, at the same time, gave grossly inflated figures on the workers’ incomes. During contract negotiations, the press often reports on union workers’ incomes as a way to divide them from those who receive lower pay.

Terminal bosses profits \$510 billion

The ILWU union contract expired 13 months ago. During the past year, the PMA has balked at contract negotiations. Their profits have been astronomical, according to a June 2 ILWU press release: “PMA member carriers and terminal operators made historic profits of \$510 billion during the pandemic. In some cases, profits jumped nearly 1000%. Even as shipping volumes return to normal in 2023, PMA members have continued to post revenues that far exceed pre-pandemic times by billions of

dollars.

“ILWU workers risked and lost their lives during the pandemic to ensure grocery store shelves were stocked, PPE was made available, essential medical supplies were reaching our hospitals.” Record volumes of goods were moved, enabling the shipping industries’ astronomical revenues. “Despite this fact, from pre-pandemic levels through 2022, the percentage of ILWU wages and benefits continued to drop compared to PMA rising revenues.”

Gabriel Prawl, a longshore worker, a leading member of the Million Worker March Movement, and president of the Seattle A. Philip Randolph Institute, said that “longshore workers on the whole coast have been working above and beyond the requirements of their jobs, thereby violating their own safety rules to keep the supply chain moving.”

Longshore jobs are among the most dangerous. Clarence Thomas, a retired ILWU member, said: “The waterfront tonnage is moved by cranes and container movement machines. If anything hits you it’s either going to maim you for life or it’s going to kill you. I have seen signs at maritime terminals that disclose there are known carcinogens on the premises such as particulate matter, which is soot from diesel fuel. Longshore workers work in rain, sleet, snow, day and night. They’re subjected to a number of health challenges. A longshore brother was found to be unresponsive in the crane and he subsequently died of a heart attack in the hospital. It took 45 minutes to access the crane.”

Working safely antagonizes bosses

Up and down the West Coast after a full year of stalled contract negotiations, ILWU members began to follow the safety procedures designated for dangerous jobs, “working by the book.” Working safely antagonizes the carriers and terminal operators. It’s safer, slower, and it lowers profits.

In Seattle on June 2, port bosses fired ILWU Local 52 workers on the night shift and again on the morning shift. In response to the bosses' attack in Seattle, the militant ILWU Local 10 in Oakland, California, stopped work and did not return over the weekend. CNBC reported that the port shutdowns were expected to spread across the West Coast as workers protest over wage negotiations in contract talks with port management.

Perhaps the most decisive impact on the port bosses was the preparations initiated by the militant African American Longshore Coalition (AALC) in the Ports of Oakland, Seattle, and Tacoma, Washington, for a "West Coast Stop Work Action to Commemorate Juneteenth" — June 19, 1865, the date that the last enslaved Black people in Texas were informed of their emancipation.

Thomas said, "It is a reminder that the job of ending all forms of slavery is not yet finished. The U.S. was built on the backs of enslaved labor. On Juneteenth, we celebrate the emancipation as our commitment to fight against the legacy of slavery, the long-standing impact of systemic racism and white supremacy, and all forms of discrimination which are used to keep the working class divided.

"Karl Marx made it abundantly clear that enslaved Black people in North America had to be free before wage slaves of the working class could be free of exploitation. As Marx wrote. 'We have nothing to lose but our chains and a world to win,'" Thomas concluded.

