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Rank-and-File Dockworkers Hit the Road, Hold Port ‘Unity Tour’ as Bargaining Begins

by Marsha Niemeijer

Rank-and-file dockworkers caravanned down the Eastern seaboard and across the Gulf Coast in February to build member-to-member unity and push their employer as they head into negotiations.

The members of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) want to ensure that port bosses don’t use the economic crisis to put concessions on the table.

In the last eight years, wage tiers have saved longshore employers more than \$358 million in New York and New Jersey’s ports alone, say members of the Longshore Workers Coalition, the union reform group within the ILA that organized the Gulf Coast caravan. The LWC has been preparing for the negotiations of this master contract, which covers 12,000 dockworkers from Maine to Texas, for several years.

Tony Perlstein, LWC co-chair and Local 1588 secretary-treasurer, said the members and officers the “Port Unity Tour” met were excited that other longshore workers and locals were taking the time to plan for the future together.

“It really brought home this sense that we are all in the same union, fighting the same fight,” he said.

Local 1588’s leg of the tour started in New Jersey and traveled south, stopping in Wilmington, Delaware; Baltimore; Norfolk, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and Tampa, Florida.

RICH COMPANIES

A separate caravan organized by the LWC began in Houston and toured ports in Beaumont, Texas; New Orleans; and Mobile, Alabama. On both caravans, participants leafleted hiring halls and met with local officers and members to discuss local working conditions, contract enforcement issues, and the negotiations now underway.

The LWC expects the U.S. Maritime Alliance, the umbrella group of East Coast longshore employers, to use the economic crisis to push through new technologies and implement deep cuts, even as they anticipate a profitable future. Shippers are expected to use the expansion of the Panama Canal, to be completed by 2014, to push more traffic to East and Gulf Coast ports.

ILA members note that they do the same work as their West Coast counterparts but are paid less. In response, the LWC has declared that if the new contract does not progressively eliminate the wage and benefit tiers, the caucus will organize a “vote no” campaign.

Although the contract does not expire until September 2010, ILA bargainers went to the table 19 months early. The Maritime Alliance rejected all the union’s proposals and demanded significant cuts. Management’s

counterproposal would eliminate overtime on weekends and nights, implement shift work, and freeze wages and other income. The union is formulating its response now; no further bargaining sessions were scheduled.

The LWC has been critical of holding early talks. Leonard Riley, LWC co-chair and Local 1422 member from Charleston, South Carolina, said he was concerned that the economic crisis is being used to push the union back on points it's gained.

"The ILA leadership is anxious to settle early because the union is broke and increased wages would bring more money into the union coffers," said Eddie McBride, a Local 1414 member in Savannah, Georgia. "The employers know this. That's not a good bargaining strategy. We need to bargain right up until the contract expires."

REJECTING CONCESSIONS

New technologies would eliminate jobs and weaken the union. When shippers standardized container size decades ago, enabling the use of giant cranes, they eliminated tens of thousands of jobs. The union fought for royalty payments, which charge shippers a fee per container moved, as a way for workers to make up for lost hours and to fund health and welfare funds.

Over time employers won a cap on royalty payments. In light of newer labor-saving technologies, the LWC argues that removing the cap would assure that workers with even minimal hours can get some compensation for their lack of guaranteed work in an industry that still hires workers based on the amount of work available each day.

The LWC is also urging the creation of national health and safety standards, because looser standards at some ports have led to increased accident rates.

T.L. Simon, president of Local 24 in Houston, said cranes at his port have inadequate warning sirens, and he's witnessed near-fatal accidents. "My multiple attempts to get this redressed have been rebuffed," he said. "I'm tired of talking; something needs to be done."

GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE

The LWC has been mobilizing to impact negotiations since before the ILA's July 2007 convention, where more than two dozen outspoken LWC members were elected to the ILA bargaining committee. The convention adopted the LWC's bargaining goals: eliminate tiers, remove the cap on container royalties, and create national safety standards.

The LWC also built a communications network reaching into dozens of longshore locals. Flyers arguing that concessions don't save jobs have been circulated by the thousands, and another series of port-to-port tours is planned.

"We can't let the employers divide and conquer," said Guido Sanchez of Local 1588. "We must get on the same page."

[Marsha Niemeijer is staff organizer for the Longshore Workers Coalition.]

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