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“Proceed Cautiously” Master Contract Bargaining Update #2 (January 9, 2009)

Delegates discussed contract proposals over the final two days of the Wage Scale Committee meeting in Tampa, Florida, January 6-7, 2009.

EARLY BARGAINING A MISTAKE

Although Longshore Worker Coalition-affiliated delegates and others cautioned against early bargaining, the ILA indicated it wants to proceed in order to see what the responses of the employers—represented by the United States Maritime Alliance—will be to the ILA proposals. However, there have already been early signals that negotiations will not be easy.

During the meetings the delegates were presented with a letter from Mediterranean Shipping Company, one of the larger container carriers, demanding concessions. The ILA will respond by informing the carrier that it will have to negotiate through the USMX during the scheduled bargaining round between the ILA and USMX, which will commence February 9, 2009.

LWC Co-Chair, and ILA Local 1422 member Leonard Riley, from Charleston, South Carolina, said “I’m concerned about the use of the economic crisis to push us back and think that we’ve gained.”

Eddie McBride, an LWC member from ILA Local 1414 in Savannah, Georgia, concurs: “I fully supported the LWC’s efforts to postpone the negotiations given these economic times. We need to bargain right up until the contract expires in September 2010.”

McBride also added that he believes the ILA leadership is anxious to settle now because the union is broke and increased wages would bring more money into the union coffers. “The employers know this. That’s not a good bargaining strategy.”

PROPOSALS

Key proposals passed the body include proposals to eliminate the wage tiers and royalty caps, create a national safety program and proposals that would protect the ILA’s jurisdiction.

“Eliminating the wage and benefit tier is our most important goal,” said TL Simon, President of ILA Local 24 in Houston, Texas, and also a Wage Scale delegate. “Research has shown that these tiers have saved the employers a total of \$1.4billion!”

(See other side.)

Simon also emphasized the importance of the national safety program. “Here in Houston our cranes have inadequate warning sirens. I have seen almost fatal accidents happen with my own eyes. My multiple attempts to get this redressed have been rebuffed. I’m tired of talking; something needs to be done.”

The maintenance, checkers and longshore locals all put forth language to anticipate the growth of new work methods, technology and the encroachment of non-ILA work.

Other important proposals passed including elimination of the ineffective grievance procedure, returning the right to strike, funding MILA to reduce the eligibility requirements, and increasing fringe benefit funding.

Overall Riley feels like a lot of issues remain unresolved. “I have concerns about some of the proposals and what they will look like when they are implemented,” he said. “We need to proceed cautiously and see what reaction we get from the employer and we really need much more discussion on the union side before we can get down to serious negotiations.”

RANK-AND-FILE PARTICIPATION

Each craft and sub-committee elected six delegates who, along with international officers, will develop specific language and meet with management. LWC member Eddie McBride will be one of the six longshore delegates.

LWC member Fatih Shakir from ILA Local 1416 in Miami, Florida, said, of this process: “Electing subcommittees to look over proposals and the way in which the elections happened—by secret ballot—was an important new step in the bargaining process. We now have rank-and-file members talking with management alongside our international officers. This will increase the transparency of the negotiations.” Unfortunately McBride commented that “while there certainly was more democracy and transparency at this meeting, the ILA leadership did use their influence behind the scenes to stop at least one LWC member from being fairly elected.”

Finally, ILA President Richard Hughes made the following commitments: that all final language to be submitted to management will be approved by the entire Wage Scale Committee and that the entire wage scale body will be asked to approve the decisions made during bargaining.