

# Bush threatens to use troops against West Coast dockworkers

By David Walsh and Ron Jorgenson  
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The far-reaching threats made by the Bush administration against the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in the event of a West Coast dock strike or work slowdown reveal the essential class character of the government's "war on terrorism." In the name of national security and its open-ended global war, the White House is threatening to use military force to destroy the basic rights of workers to organize and fight for decent wages and conditions.

The ILWU, representing 10,500 dockworkers at 29 major Pacific ports, is embroiled in a bitter contract dispute with the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), representing the shipping lines. The longshoremen's contract expired July 1 and the ports have been operating on the basis of day-to-day contract extensions ever since. The key sticking point involves management demands for concessions that would allow for the introduction of new technology. In July the ILWU offered to accept technologies that it said would eliminate 30 percent of marine clerk jobs.

The employers are also demanding cutbacks in health care and no increase in pensions. ILWU and PMA negotiators resumed talks August 27, after a recess caused by the death of ILWU President James Spinosa's father. The union reports that discussions centered on the issues of health care benefits, the arbitrator selection process and port security.

According to ILWU Communications Director Steve Stallone, Labor Department official Andrew Siff, representing a government task force, informed the union on several occasions in July of the draconian steps the Bush administration was considering. These included declaring a national emergency and delaying a strike for 80 days under the Taft-Hartley Act, placing the union under the Railway Labor Act (giving the president greater powers to halt a walkout), breaking up the union's bargaining unit into individual ports on "anti-trust" grounds (so the union could only strike one facility at a time) and having the National Guard or Navy personnel run the ports.

Stallone told the *New York Times* (August 11, 2002), "He [Siff] made these threats in a meeting with our top officers.... The government said these weren't threats, that they were just giving us information they thought we should know. This is mobster talk." According to Stallone, Siff told union officers that they were looking at a "PATCO-type scenario," a reference to the mass firing of air traffic controllers by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have also intervened. Ridge reportedly telephoned the ILWU's Spinosa and suggested that any job slow-down or strike would be viewed as a threat to national security.

The *Los Angeles Times* (August 5) quoted an unnamed Labor

Department official (presumably Siff, whose name was later revealed by the ILWU) who confirmed that various options had been discussed with the union "in the context of a job action occurring during wartime." The official told the newspaper, "We have been very candid. We have told them if they act in a manner that is disruptive, we will use any means necessary to make sure our troops in the field get what they need."

Siff, counsel to Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, has connections to the extreme right. He is a member of the Federalist Society, the group of right-wing lawyers and judges that played a key role in the anti-Clinton impeachment drive, and served as law clerk to Judge Danny Boggs of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, a Reagan appointee.

In the same *LA Times* article, the "Labor Department official" said of the longshoremen, "The way these guys have negotiated, they make demands and when they don't get what they want, they engage in slowdowns. This time, before the normal historical pattern was allowed to unfold, we went in to assess the situation." The "normal historical pattern" that the Bush administration finds so outrageous is the ILWU members' legally-guaranteed right to strike or engage in work slowdowns to pursue their demands.

The *LA Times* further reported that soon after negotiations began on the new West Coast longshore contract, "the White House convened a working group to monitor them, with representatives from the departments of Commerce, Labor and Transportation and the Office of Homeland Security."

The existence of this task force was revealed in a memorandum from the West Coast Waterfront Coalition (WCWC), a business group bringing together giant retailers such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Ikea, Nike, Target and The Gap. The WCWC is lobbying the Bush administration to prevent a work stoppage that would disrupt the flow of Asian-made goods. The Pacific ports handle nearly \$300 billion worth of goods each year.

The June 5 memo, which reports on the WCWC's lobbying efforts in Washington the day before, is a revealing document. It notes that group members "met with key Bush Administration Officials to convey the message that there is a need both to obtain labor concessions at the West Coast ports that will allow the application of technology and to avoid labor disruptions on the West Coast this summer that could stall a fragile economy."

The memo reveals that the administration had already established "an inter-agency working group on this issue" (the longshore negotiations), chaired by Carlos Bonilla of the National Economic Council (a White House office). The WCWC delegation met with Bonilla, Siff, Steven J. Law, Chief of Staff at the Department of

Labor, and John McGowan of the Office of Homeland Security. The memo explains: “The attendance of Mr. McGowan from Homeland Security underscores the White House’s concerns that the lack of technology at the ports is a particular problem for security.”

The WCWC also reports on a discussion with Samuel Bodman, deputy secretary of commerce, who told the business group members that “the Commerce Department understood the impact labor disruptions could have on the economy.” According to the WCWC memo, “He [Bodman] also commented that the strategy of delay, followed by disruptive slowdowns obviously gives the union a great deal of negotiating leverage. He suggested that the union will employ these tactics and that the question was really how could the Administration stop them.”

While Labor Department spokespersons officially claim that the government is strictly neutral in the PMA-ILWU dispute, these remarks make clear that the Bush administration is plotting with the employers to weaken or break the ILWU under the cover of the “war on terrorism.” Administration officials consider workers’ entirely legal efforts to win better wages and conditions as impermissible disruptions of the flow of profits to big business.

The use of national security and the “war on terrorism” as a pretext for stripping workers of their democratic and collective bargaining rights is already the policy adopted by the Bush administration in relation to the new Department of Homeland Security. Bush is demanding that the 170,000 federal employees being transferred into the new department lose both their civil service protection and union representation.

Bush’s threats have angered longshoremen up and down the Pacific Coast. Rallies attended by thousands of dockworkers and their supporters were held August 12 in port cities such as Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, Oakland and Los Angeles. East Coast dockworkers, members of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), in Philadelphia, Jacksonville, Savannah and Charleston, rallied in support of the ILWU.

The response of the ILWU and AFL-CIO bureaucracy to the Bush administration threats has been predictably cowardly. It has consisted chiefly of lobbying the Democrats in Congress to restrain the administration, on the one hand, and reassuring the media of the union’s patriotism, on the other.

The principal message of Democratic Party officials who addressed the ILWU rallies, such as Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle in Portland, was that the administration should stay out of the negotiations. In a June 28 letter, Senators Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California called on Bush officials to withdraw from the dispute. “We strongly believe that the parties should be left to resolve their differences through good-faith bargaining,” they wrote.

The Democrats, fearful of the political implications of open strike-breaking, are pressing the government to rely on the union bureaucracy to implement job-cutting on the docks. The ILWU has presided over precisely that during the last few decades. In Seattle, for example, there are only 550 workers left out of a workforce of 2,400 in 1963. Richard Mead, president of ILWU Local 10 in San Francisco, acknowledges that “We handle 10 times the amount of cargo that we did decades ago, but now we have one-twentieth the people.”

The ILWU was born out of the 1934 San Francisco general strike and a break with the AFL’s ILA in 1937. In 1950 the ILWU was expelled from the CIO due to the presence of Communist Party

members or supporters in its leadership—including long-time leader Harry Bridges—and only rejoined the AFL-CIO in 1988. The ILWU officially opposed the Vietnam War and took a number of stands in opposition to US Cold War policies. Its Stalinist-influenced politics, however, were always laced with nationalism and the union opposed a political break by the working class from the Democratic Party.

The ILWU officials’ response to the current crisis has been to plead their case in terms of American patriotism. ILWU President Spinosa declared, “There is nothing unpatriotic about American workers insisting on their rights under American law.” At the Oakland and Long Beach ILWU rallies, the union handed out a sign that read, “Fight terrorism, not workers.” In an August 27 statement, Spinosa boasted about the union’s efforts to improve security on the docks, adding, “Unfortunately it is not clear that the representatives of the PMA have the same commitment for increasing our national security.”

Peter Peyton, from the ILWU Coast Legislative Action Committee, asserted that the driving force behind the federal interference in the negotiations “are the giant retailers who import huge quantities of overseas products to sell to American working families.” He continued: “They have joined together under the banner of the West Coast Waterfront Coalition to hold secret meetings with the administration in an effort to squeeze every last drop of profit at the expense of good American jobs.” Such national-chauvinist rhetoric only plays into the hands of Bush and the employers.

The threatened assault by the Bush administration against the West Coast longshoremen underscores the character of this government’s policies: unrestrained militarism and aggression internationally, and a full-scale attack on the basic rights of the working class at home. Using the pretext of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the government is revealing in the docks’ dispute its determination to undermine or eliminate the right to strike. If the longshoremen can be described as holding “the entire national economy hostage,” in the words of the WCWC memo, why not other sections of workers as well, in basic industry, transportation and even retail? Moreover, this “wartime” condition—imposed without a congressional declaration of war—is permanent, since government officials refuse to define its endpoint.

The present crisis on the docks illustrates the dead end of the nationalist and pro-capitalist policy of the trade union bureaucracy. By supporting US imperialism in its predatory policies overseas, including the war in Afghanistan and the “war on terrorism,” the AFL-CIO undermines any serious struggle to defend the social conditions and democratic rights of workers within the US. The union bureaucracy opens the way for the destruction of all of the past gains won by previous generations of working people.

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