

Teamsters sell out strike by port truck drivers in southern California

By Marc Wells
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After an eight-day strike, truck drivers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California returned to work last Friday. Los Angeles' Democratic mayor, Eric Garcetti, brokered a deal between the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and the companies, which resolves none of the issues that have driven the port drivers into struggle.

In a joint statement, the union and management said, “[a]s requested by Mayor Eric Garcetti, the Teamsters, QTS, Inc., LACA Express, Inc., and WinWin Logistics, Inc. have each separately agreed to continue discussions to resolve outstanding issues between them. All sides have expressed an interest in sitting down and continuing confidential discussions of these issues and challenges facing the drayage industry. QTS Inc., LACA Express, Inc. and WinWin Logistics, Inc. each respect drivers' right to choice with regard to unionization.”

Truckers haul about \$4 billion worth of cargo daily, yet they live on the threshold of poverty. The grievances of the largely immigrant workforce range from wage theft and their false classification as “independent contractors”—a ruse used to force workers to pay fuel, maintenance and insurance costs. They also oppose retaliatory firing, intimidation and lower than minimum wage pay.

Drivers for LACA Express, QTS and WinWin Logistics were ordered back to work after behind-the-doors talks between the corporations and the Teamsters. The latter is chiefly concerned about lifting the “independent contractor” designation, which has been an obstacle to gaining the franchise over port drivers and collecting union dues.

In a cynical maneuver on the eve of the sellout, the union “expanded” the strike with a series of marches in front of the Union Pacific rail yard in Commerce that

slowed rail traffic. Pacer Cartage and Harbor Rail Transport (HRT) workers were involved, but ended their action on Friday as well.

In fact, the previous week the union instructed truckers from the three other companies—the most infamous for their anti-worker practices—to return to work. Garcetti and Teamsters essentially ended the walkout at Total Transportation Services Inc. (TTSI), Pacific 9 Transportation and Green Fleet Systems by announcing a “cooling-off” period, just like the one engineered in July.

The entire operation by the Teamsters was an orchestrated stunt from the start. It is hard to even call it a “strike,” since it was limited to a handful of pickets and was designed to cause as little disruption as possible. Garcetti's office released a statement remarking that, while the companies involved registered limited slowdowns, “the job actions did not affect the movement of cargo at the Port of Los Angeles.”

With nearly 40 percent of US imports coming through the Los Angeles/Long Beach ports, the greatest concern for politicians, unions and corporations was the containment of this action and the avoidance of major disruptions, especially before the key retail Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

While workers have gained nothing, the Teamsters bureaucracy hopes to cash in from its role as labor policeman for the companies. As for the workers, the “right” to unionize in this case means the “right” to pay monthly union dues to an organization which conspires with the employers and the politicians behind their backs and operates entirely outside of the control of its so-called members.

The Teamsters were not alone in this latest betrayal. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union

(ILWU) is equally responsible. Both unions did everything possible to block the expansion of the truck drivers' struggle to other sections of dockworkers, including 20,000 longshoremen the ILWU has forced to remain on the job even though they have been working without a contract since July.

Joint action would effectively close the ports. "Without the longshore workers, the terminals can't operate," Port of Long Beach Spokesman Lee Peterson recently stated, adding, "All facets of cargo movement and container movement are done by ILWU workers."

During the previous job action by port truckers last July, the ILWU acted as the chief strikebreaker deliberately sabotaging solidarity by longshoremen who refused to cross the drivers' picket lines. The ILWU and port management agreed to temporarily extend the previous labor agreement so that an arbitrator could use the no-strike pledge in the contract to order ILWU to return to work.

Bound by their intimate ties to the Democratic Party and their pro-capitalist and nationalist outlook, the unions serve only to disorganize and undermine the working class. The interests of the union executives are in irreconcilable conflict with the interests of the workers they purport to represent.

Announcing the settlement, Fred Potter, International Vice President of IBT and Director of Teamsters Port Division, boasted, "We are beginning to see change in the drayage industry. Drivers are demanding industry-wide change and we look forward to more drivers joining this growing movement. We pledge to support the drivers until justice is served."

In reality, the union is offering itself as a cheap labor contractor and pledging its full support for the further restructuring and downsizing of the ports. This will be done at the expense of jobs, living standards, and working conditions of drivers and other port workers.

The unions' deliberate effort to isolate these truckers compounds workers' fear of company retaliation as well as penalties from immigration authorities. A large portion of truckers remains undocumented and are exposed to deportation at any given time. Meanwhile, the Teamsters continue to support Obama and his repressive anti-worker policies, including the continued criminalization of undocumented immigrants, which is at the center of his recent immigration executive order.

This struggle was sold out but opposition to the

exploitation of truck drivers and other port workers continues. The lessons must be drawn from this latest betrayal, and new organizations of struggle, formed by rank-and-file workers themselves, must be built. The starting point of a real struggle is the rejection of the pro-capitalist and nationalist policies of the official unions and their support for the big business Democratic politicians, including Mayor Garcetti.

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