

Montreal dockworkers escalate strike action against speed-up, victimization

By Carl Bronski
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Dockworkers at the Port of Montreal began their third limited strike in a month Monday, in response to management provocations last week at two terminals contracted to Termont, a container shipment operator. This week's strike, which is limited to four days, involves 355 longshoremen, foremen, and maintenance personnel at the two terminals.

All told, 1,125 members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 375 are involved in a long-running contract dispute with the Maritime Employers Association. Due to restrictions imposed under the federal government's "essential worker" regulations, a portion of the workforce is required to stay on the job during any work stoppage, to process grain shipments and shipments bound for Newfoundland.

In a separate contract dispute, checkers at the two Termont terminals are set to strike for 48 hours this Wednesday and Thursday. The checkers, who coordinate the loading and unloading of container cargo and its transfer to trains and trucks, are resisting the Port of Montreal's plans to use technological change to slash jobs. They are represented by Local 1657 of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA).

The Port of Montreal longshoremen have been working without a contract since December 31, 2018. At the beginning of July, they conducted a 40-hour strike to press their demands for a new contract that addresses the oppressive working conditions on the docks and provides enhanced job security provisions. Last week, most dockworkers throughout the entire Port complex joined a four-day strike. During that work stoppage, managers from Termont crossed picket lines to perform work normally handled by the union workers—an action described as a "declaration of war" by CUPE Local 375 official Michel Murray.

Strikers at the two Termont terminals confronted the managers when they ended their strikebreaking shifts last Monday and again on Wednesday when managers, in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid strikers, were bussed directly

from the Port to their cars parked near Montreal's Olympic Stadium. During the Wednesday confrontation, Termont managers called the police. However, by the time they arrived, the strikers had left the scene. No charges were laid despite allegations of "violence" made by managers against the longshoremen. Michel Murray said tempers had flared because one of the strikebreakers drove his car through a crowd of strikers. In answer to Termont's use of management strikebreakers, workers are mounting this week's four-day strike.

The full gamut of employer and business organizations is agitating for the intervention of government authorities to force an end to all job actions at the Port. The Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, the Federation of Quebec Chambers of Commerce, the Quebec Employers' Council, the Manufacturers and Exporters of Quebec, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business have all lined up to complain that the strike is damaging profits for the companies they represent, and threatening the Port's future.

The Maritime Employers Association, which oversees contract negotiations at the Port, has worked might and main for almost two years to outlaw strike activity on the docks and enforce brutal working conditions on the dockworkers. Over the past 21 months the workers have three times voted overwhelmingly for strike action. Yet until last month, no strike had taken place as the union bowed to employer interference and federal government foot-dragging in the interminable strike authorization process.

The workers are demanding a new contract that addresses the gruelling working conditions on the docks. Current scheduling practices force workers to labour 19 days out of every 21. Citing an expansion in the volume of imports and exports at the port, the employer has insisted on a threefold increase in the pace of work during weekend shifts. In addition, a vicious disciplinary regime has resulted, since the last contract was signed in 2013, in 30 firings and over 1,000 suspension days levied against members who have resisted the brutal working conditions. Finally, the Maritime

Employers Association is demanding job reductions even as the pace of work has steadily increased.

After the first strike vote in December 2018, the Canada Industrial Relations Board convened to decide which, if any, of the various cargoes regularly loaded and unloaded at the port would be declared “essential.” Federal regulations allow for any service necessary to “prevent imminent and serious danger to the health and safety of the public” to be designated as essential. Brazenly, the Maritime Employers Association insisted that all tasks performed by the dockworkers should fall under the “essential” designation.

Workers, however, pointed out that shipments of wine, furniture and a whole array of other consumer goods are hardly essential. Furthermore, products such as pharmaceuticals that could be considered important for public health can easily be unloaded at other Canadian ports or delivered by truck from the United States. The employer simply refused to absorb any extra costs that would ensue from additional overland transport. Although questions of “convenience” and “cost savings” are not meant to be part of “essential services” deliberations, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) took over a year to hand down a ruling. Delivered on June 9, that ruling found the strike could go ahead, but only provided grain shipments and services to Newfoundland were maintained.

Employers across Canada and internationally are determined to extract the last ounce of sweat from their workforces in order to maintain and increase the profits for their shareholders. In order to resist this onslaught against their living standards and physical well-being, dockworkers must recognize that they are confronting not just an individual employer, but big business as a whole, its political hirelings, and the capitalist state. CUPE is doing everything to prevent an open clash with the federal Liberal government and its resort to strikebreaking legislation, by limiting the dockers to rotating strikes and strictly abiding by the CIRB decision on the provision of “essential services.”

During the coronavirus pandemic, the unions have further integrated themselves into a corporatist partnership with the government and big business. As a union representing tens of thousands of health care workers, CUPE has played a crucial role in smothering action to secure personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline care workers, and has lent its support to the reckless drive, spearheaded by the Trudeau government, to force workers back on the job amid the pandemic.

The unions that serve as the bargaining agents for dockworkers on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts as well as in the St. Lawrence Seaway have, for decades, presided over one concessions contract after another. In 2010, following a

bitter five-day lockout in 2010, CUPE agreed to an early retirement program to remove workers with higher seniority from the workforce and allow the employer to replace them with lower-paid younger workers.

This time around, CUPE did nothing to challenge the pro-employer labour relations process, which enabled the Maritime Employers Association to ignore workers’ demands for close to two years. Murray now claims that limited strike action will force management back to the bargaining table, a perspective that can only serve to lead the strikers’ struggle to defeat and another rotten concessions deal.

In reality, the only way the employers will concede to the longshoremen’s demands is if they face a powerful mass working-class movement fighting against speed-up and heavy workloads, job cuts, and workplace harassment. Conditions are ripe for the development of such a working-class counteroffensive. Workers across the country, who have endured years of austerity and concessions, are now being forced back to work under conditions of stepped-up exploitation by the corporate elite and a raging pandemic.

However, this strategy can only be developed if striking workers take control of their struggle out of the hands of the CUPE union bureaucrats by forming an independent strike committee. Such a committee should advance a series of nonnegotiable demands, including an end to management strikebreaking, relief from the gruelling work schedule, and guaranteed jobs for all workers. It also must appeal to workers in Montreal, across Canada, and internationally for a joint struggle against the assault of the corporate elite and its governments on workers’ pay and conditions, and to secure decent-paying, safe and secure jobs for all.

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