

The ILWU Can Still Win!

AUGUST 1—Job losses, sub-contracting, below-inflation wages: ILWU Canada members have already said NO to one rotten contract and now face anti-strike legislation if they don't accept the new deal worked out between the union leadership and the bosses and federal government. We don't know what's in this new agreement. But one thing that *is* clear is that ILWU members want to fight now against job losses and plummeting living standards. And it's also clear that this is being undermined by the strategy of the union leadership. What is required is a totally different strategy. Simply put, the extremely crucial nature of the West Coast ports to the Canadian capitalist bosses means that nothing will be gained without a decisive, unrelenting battle against both the BCMEA and the government.

ILWU Canada president Rob Ashton has talked about the need for a “class war.” Fine words. But what have he and the rest of the executive done to actually *win* this war? After 13 days on the picket lines, they sent everybody back to work as soon as a tentative agreement was reached, without a vote by the membership, going against one of the most elementary principles of trade unionism: no contract, no work! The reality is that despite two weeks of solid pickets, the bosses did not take the union seriously. They expected the leadership to continue the same dance: make noise, blow off steam at the base, feign outrage, then come back and “be reasonable”—the same old game of institutional play-fighting with the BCMEA and the government which generated the current impasse in the first place. This cycle must be broken now!

Can the ILWU still win? Yes! But how? Of course, the pressures on the union are intense: media

frenzy, right-wing politicians and business leaders screaming against “overpaid” longshore workers destroying the economy, etc. What stands behind this hysterical campaign are the raw class interests of the bosses, their drive for profits, and they will not relent unless they are faced with even bigger losses. So let's give it to them: *countermobilize* against this onslaught! Standing up for decent wages and against job losses due to automation and sub-contracting, the ILWU's battle is in the interest of the *entire* working class—they need the ILWU to win and the ILWU needs to mobilize their power in order to win this fight!

The potential allies are countless. Threats of back-to-work legislation will be felt deeply throughout the labour movement: nurses, teachers and other public sector workers, port workers in Montreal who faced the same thing three years ago, etc. All have a vested interest in defending not just the ILWU but their own future negotiations. Obvious and immediate allies include the B.C. port truckers, who have waged their own tough battles in recent years. This points to the crucial need for ILWU Canada to champion the oppressed minorities in the Lower Mainland, notably the large South Asian community who form a growing percentage of the ILWU membership and most of the port truckers. The union must stand for full citizenship rights for all immigrants and demand an end to all forms of racial discrimination, open or hidden.

To appeal to the workers of Quebec, it must make a clear statement in favour of that nation's struggle for independence. It must champion the cause of Indigenous peoples against racist degradation. Within the ILWU itself, there must be an end to the tier

system that keeps 60 percent of the workforce in a precarious state. This could be implemented immediately by shortening the workweek at no loss in pay.

But none of this is being done by the current leadership. The labour federations from the BC Fed to the CLC have issued calls of solidarity, but what do they actually *do* about it? What has Rob Ashton, president of ILWU Canada and VP of the BC Fed, done to mobilize the labour movement behind the ILWU? Next to nothing, because they and other labour leaders are limited to a strategy that accepts the capitalist order. Union leaders appeal to the “moral” fibre of the capitalist class by pointing to all the sacrifices workers made during Covid and after. But who enforced these sacrifices within the labour movement in the first place? The very same labour tops who are today working to derail the ILWU struggle. During Covid as during the current battle, the union bureaucracy has chained the workers to the interests of the bosses and their government.

Relatedly, the labour tops push the idea that the Trudeau Liberals supported by the NDP are a “lesser evil” to the openly anti-union Conservatives. This simply means supporting the very government that is today attacking longshore workers. Many ILWU leaders are NDP supporters, but this party claims to defend the workers’ interests while propping up the anti-worker Liberals! True enough, the NDP has refused to vote for back-to-work legislation and say they will oppose the Liberals’ plan to impose a contract on the ILWU. But if they are serious, they should end their coalition with the Liberals and pull the plug on this anti-worker government!

But don’t hold your breath: Jagmeet Singh and the NDP have been completely in line with the Liberals on every significant front: defense of U.S.-dominated free trade; Covid lockdowns; the Ukraine war; indeed, the whole hypocritical construct of the capitalist Liberals. And what does Canada look like under this Liberal-NDP regime (or B.C. under the NDP, for that matter)? It is a country of inflation, housing crises, crumbling health care, etc. In order to mobilize and organize an effective onslaught against all of the misery brought about by the capitalist system, we need a workers party that fights for a workers government!

But even the union battles of today must be guided by a totally new political program and leadership,

independent of the capitalist politicians. The unions need a leadership that understands that the capitalists will always defend their class interests by squeezing the maximum profits from the workers who make their industries run. To win, workers must defend *their* class interests, i.e., the right to a decent living, safe work environment, shorter work hours, and more.

Other socialist groups have intervened in the strike, including the Fightback group. But far from offering a path forward, Fightback builds illusions that the pro-capitalist ILWU leadership only needs to be pressured to fight in the workers’ interests, harking back to the “militant traditions of our movement” while calling on the bureaucrats to “be prepared to defy the law.” What they *do not* do is show how the current leadership is an obstacle to victory, much less fight for a new, revolutionary leadership of the unions.

Things must change, and they must change now! As an immediate program of action, we put forward the following points, which we encourage anyone to fight for within the ILWU:

- Government out of union business, no imposed contracts or forced arbitration—it’s up to the unions to fight freely and not under the grip of the Canadian capitalist state. To hell with the government’s labour code!
- Abolish the tier system—all ILWU members must be made permanent and paid at the same rate!
- Automation should benefit the workers, not the bosses! For a shorter workweek at no loss in pay!
- All port workers must be in the union—organize the unorganized!
- No illusions in any of the bosses’ parties—Liberals or Conservatives. NDP MPs claim to oppose attacks on ILWU bargaining rights, but if they are serious they should end their corridor coalition and let the Liberal government fall!
- Rally all of labour and the oppressed to back the ILWU!
- For a genuine class-struggle leadership of the unions!

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