

For Labor Strikes Against the Imperialist War Machine! ILWU's May Day Anti-War Work Stoppage Shows the Way!



NO CREDIT

ILWU Local 10 contingent in San Francisco anti-war demonstration, 2004

On 8 February, delegates to the Coast Caucus of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), traditionally one of America's most militant unions, voted overwhelmingly in favor of a motion submitted by San Francisco Local 10 calling for the international workers' movement to "mobilize for a 'No Peace No Work Holiday' May 1, 2008 for 8 hours to demand an immediate end to the war and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Middle East." To implement this motion, the ILWU has called a "stop-work meeting" to effectively shut down the docks on the entire American West Coast.

This is an enormously significant initiative that every opponent of the imperialist occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan must actively support. While this is the first attempt in many years to wield the power of labor against the capitalist war machine in the U.S., it grows out of earlier political actions initiated by militants on the docks that stretch back to the 1970s (see "Origin of ILWU's Political Action," 1917 No. 21). In 1984, Jack Heyman, the longshoreman who put forward the motion in Local 10, was an active supporter of an 11-day labor boycott of South African apartheid cargo aboard the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* at Pier 80 in San Francisco. That boycott, which was eventually broken with a federal injunction, was an important precedent for the "stop-work" action initiated by Heyman in 1999 in solidarity with former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, an innocent man framed for a murder he did not commit (see

The Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal). On 24 April 1999, to mark Mumia's birthday, every port on the U.S. West Coast, from San Diego to Bellingham (north of Seattle), was shut down for the day shift.

Shutting the West Coast docks on May Day sends a powerful signal of international solidarity from American workers to their sisters and brothers around the world, particularly to those in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering under the jackboot of U.S./NATO occupation. Though May Day originated in the U.S., it has largely been forgotten by the American workers' movement—but elsewhere it remains an important day for working people.

In November 2001, some 200 members of the All Japan Dockworkers' Union in Sasebo, the main port for Japan's "Maritime Self Defense Force," refused to load armaments for the U.S. war on Afghanistan to protest Japan's role in the "war on terrorism" and legislation curtailing civil liberties. On our website, we observed at the time:

"The exemplary actions of these workers, although isolated, limited in scale and tainted by pacifist illusions, provide a valuable reminder to class conscious trade unionists in other countries of the potential for mass labor political strikes to obstruct the bloody plans of the imperialist exploiters."

—"Some news that didn't fit," 18 February 2002

On 9 January 2003, as the U.S./UK imperialist coalition prepared to invade Iraq, the *Guardian* reported:

“Train drivers [in Scotland] yesterday refused to move a freight train carrying ammunition believed to be destined for British forces being deployed in the Gulf.” Noting that “the anti-war revolt is the first such industrial action by workers for decades,” the article recalled earlier high points of working-class resistance in Britain:

“Dockers went on strike rather than load British-made arms on to ships destined for Chile after the assassination of leftwing leader Salvador Allende in 1973.

“In 1920 stevedores on London’s East India Docks refused to move guns on to the Jolly George, a ship chartered to take weapons to anti-Bolsheviks after the Russian revolution.”

The current ILWU action is the first instance of American workers resisting the imperialist military crusade in the Middle East with a work stoppage. In April 2003, an anti-war protest organized by ILWU members and others in front of the Port of Oakland was brutally attacked by police firing wooden dowels, “sting balls,” concussion grenades and tear gas.

The ILWU’s May Day initiative is so popular that backward elements in the union who oppose it have not dared step forward publicly. One anonymous poster on an ILWU online discussion group did put forward the following objection:

“To shut down the West Coast Ports will only serve to piss off the rest of the country in a contract year. Especially to do so on May day so the ILWU can lock arms with illegal aliens with red flags flying and chanting ‘yes we can’ in Spanish of course, would be a bad PR move. To march-strike on a perceived un-American holiday with foreigners would make it appear as if the ILWU wants our troops to be defeated while at war. If there is to be a march-strike do it after the contract is signed. March on another day, not on a perceived as an un-American holiday. The ILWU’s march-strike against the war should be with Americans from all walks of life on a patriotic holiday. Please use your heads, this is not brave just unwise....”

Jack Heyman immediately posted the following response:

“[E]ver since the 2003 ILWU Convention here in San Francisco, our union has been opposed to the war and for the immediate withdrawal of troops. It was a resolution submitted by my local, Local 10, and passed after lengthy and democratic debate. This May Day antiwar action also passed the Caucus after a full and democratic debate with only a few voting against. It’s not only the right thing to do, it’s consistent with ILWU’s Ten Guiding Principles. It just so happens that the majority of people in this country overwhelmingly oppose the war. The Caucus resolution stated both Democrat and

Republican politicians continue to fund this war despite popular opinion, and we have a unique opportunity to make a powerful antiwar statement that reflects the will of the majority not only of ILWU members but of working people in this country. The resolution calls for bringing the troops out of the Middle East and back to the U.S. It’s what the French dockworkers did to get French troops out of the Vietnam War in the ‘50’s. “As far as ‘illegal aliens’ the founder of our union was one. Harry Bridges, a seaman at the time, jumped ship in New Orleans. ILWU defends immigrant workers’ rights, a position we’ve consistently adopted at ILWU Conventions. Last May Day the Caucus was adjourned so delegates could participate in an immigrant workers’ rights rally in front of San Francisco’s City Hall....As far as May Day, it’s a workers’ holiday that was started in Chicago in the struggle for the 8-hour day. The labor movement in this country needs [to] know its proud history and reclaim its holiday.”

The leadership of the ILWU is officially endorsing the action, but is also exhibiting some nervousness about running afoul of capitalist “legality.” In anticipation of right-wing criticism, ILWU President Robert McEllrath’s 22 February letter formally notifying AFL-CIO President John Sweeney of the decision gives the port shutdowns a patriotic spin, describing them as a way to “express support for the troops by bringing them home safely.”

The shipping bosses in the Pacific Maritime Association, who have come out in flat opposition to any work stoppage on May Day, can rely on every agency of the capitalist state. To effectively counter this threat, the active support of the rest of the labor movement is vital. The ILWU’s May Day action has found a real, if so far weak, echo from U.S. postal workers, and has received a sprinkling of endorsements from unionists in Britain, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere. A 24 March motion passed by the San Francisco Labor Council in solidarity with the action stated that it “encourages other unions to follow ILWU’s call for a ‘No Peace-No Work Holiday’ or other labor actions on May Day, to express their opposition to the US wars and occupations in the Middle East.”

As the great Marxist Rosa Luxemburg observed, in the age of imperialism humanity faces the choice of socialism or barbarism. Only through a successful struggle by the international working class to overthrow the profoundly irrational capitalist economic system, which is the source of predatory imperialist war, will it be possible to create a new socialist world order and liberate humanity from the prospect of mass starvation, ecological catastrophe and nuclear annihilation that looms on the horizon under capitalism. In resisting the imperialist war-makers, the ILWU’s action points the way forward for the entire international labor movement.

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