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USA

Assessing the Battle of Longview

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THE SETTLEMENT OF contractual issues involving International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 21 in Longview, Washington also ended the immediate plans by Occupy Oakland Labor and other West Coast Occupy groups for a mobilization in defense of the Longview workers. But relevant questions are still posed about how this settlement occurred, and how the Occupy movement connects with more militant segments of the workers' movement.

The analysis presented here is both a followup of this author's previous article on the Port closures in Oakland (ATC 156, January-February 2012) and other coverage of the Longview struggle (see in particular Eduardo Soriano-Castillo's report in Labor Notes, February 2012).

The Longview dispute between ILWU and the Portland-based transnational grain exporter EGT is multifaceted. It involves issues around jobs, pensions and automation, as well as the massive expansion of commerce in agricultural goods. EGT is a creation of a troika of multinationals — the St. Louis-based Bunge North America, the Japanese firm Itochu and the Korean shipper Pan Ocean STX — in order to link up with other facilities in such diverse locations as Vietnam and the Ukraine, and to ship primarily grain to the East Asian/China market.

Bunge in particular is a significant player in this massive agribusiness game, with major involvement in soy and other crops in Brazil as well as other locations in South America (where they have been accused of tax evasion and violation of labor laws).

The conflict around the \$200 million Longview terminal initially arose in the context of a struggle in which the ILWU, whose strength is especially tied to its longshore worker base and whose members have worked the grain trade in the Northwest for eight decades, was confronting further automation, a concern that the union has battled over since the 1950s.

EGT wished to impose new work rules, especially around the length of shifts (12 hours long) which ran counter to ILWU work guidelines and would have eliminated some jobs, But the number of jobs directly at stake here was only around 50, so the immediate question was not around short-term profit rates — with chump-change savings to EGT calculated at barely over a million dollars. The economic implications for ILWU members were more serious, in that the grain work accounts for 20% of the financing of its already seriously underfunded pension and welfare funds.

Yet the real issues were around strategic class questions, especially over the historic ability of the ILWU to demonstrate its power through concerted actions, around both contractual and community/labor/international solidarity struggles including South Africa, Palestine, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mumia Abu-Jamal and police brutality.

The position of a union at critical chokeholds in international trade provides special leverage. When negotiations broke off, then, EGT and its corporate sponsors and allies saw a golden opportunity to deal a blow to what is regarded by many activists as the bellwether of union militancy. This was an attack on the ILWU's overall West Coast agreements, not just at one port.

The Struggle Escalates

Over 1000 Local 21 and other ILWU members and supporters in the Pacific Northwest responded with a dynamic

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campaign, dating back to last July when hundreds massed to block grain-hauling trains. One hundred were arrested when they entered EGT's terminal. Another train blocking took place in September, but the train eventually made it to the terminal. However, the following day workers and activists converged to empty the hoppers and dump the grain. This effectively shut down virtually all the ports in the region.

EGT responded to these efforts by co-opting the conservative leadership of Operating Engineers Local 701, who agreed to work the longer shifts at Longview and further undermine working conditions. In addition, EGT went to court and succeeded in having over \$300,000 in fines levied on Local 21, with other charges targeting the union leadership. Further, the local police predictably harassed the workers, picking them off one by one. After 35 were arrested on various misdemeanor charges, the union organized a march from the Local 21 hiring hall to the courthouse. All 200 members, accompanied by family members and retirees, turned themselves in rather than continue to be picked off one by one.

A federal judge issued an injunction, ordering the longshore workers not to block movement in and out of the terminal. But the ILWU vowed to protest any use of scab labor, and winter conditions turned this into a bitter impasse in spite of ongoing militancy.

Into this difficult situation came the forces of the Occupy movement, especially the Occupy Oakland (OO) Labor Solidarity movement. As mentioned in my previous ATC article, OO had called for a general strike in Oakland on November 2, the highlight being a mass march and action at the Port of Oakland, which was shut down with the militant solidarity of ILWU Local 10.

On November 19th, Dan Coffman, president of ILWU Local 21, spoke to an Occupy Labor rally in downtown Oakland, praising the November 2 action and calling for further solidarity with the Longview struggle. While a Defend the ILWU Committee had already been established, largely through the efforts of several senior Local 10 members, to build support for the Longview campaign — including sending people to the port when the first ship arrived at the new terminal — it was the infusion of energy from Occupy Oakland which altered the whole dynamic.

Shortly afterward, a convergence of issues (including the situation of port truckers in Los Angeles and Oakland, but primarily focused on Longview) led to the call for a second Port of Oakland shutdown on December 12. This was followed by organizing of Occupy activists along the West Coast, including Seattle, Portland, LA and Longview, which with varying degrees of success halted shipping in the ports, especially at Oakland where there was a mobilization of over 5000.

Despite the relative effectiveness of these shutdowns, considerable debate arose both within and outside the labor movement as to whether the Occupy movement had sufficiently worked with the ILWU and other unions in this mobilization. Yet December 12 was truly the turning point in the organizing campaign, not only demonstrating the capacity for coordinated Occupy action, but gaining a response from ILWU members (Locals 21 and 10 but also in Portland, Seattle and elsewhere).

The linkage between Local 21 and the Occupy movement (as well as the Defend the ILWU committee) continued to be very strong. The joint campaign was supported by a number of education unions and labor councils in the Bay Area, and began to organize for a major mobilization in Longview when the grain ship might arrive.

There was also further coordination among Occupy groupings along the coast, including the one in Longview, and even reaching the Midwest where protests occurred at the Bunge offices in St. Louis.

The leadership of the ILWU International, and leaderships of several of the leading West Coast ILWU locals, not only

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failed to back Occupy's efforts to build solidarity with the struggle of Longview Local 21, but ILWU International President Bob McEllrath publicly distanced the union from the December 12th actions, and ILWU Seattle Local 19 passed a resolution forbidding its members to support Occupy, formally or informally.

Most scandalous, on January 6 in Seattle, the presidents of ILWU Seattle Local 19, Portland Local 8, and Vancouver Local 6 led a gang of thugs in physically disrupting a meeting held by Occupy and members of the Longview local helping to organize the upcoming Longview convergence. Nonetheless, organizing for the mass protest in Longview continued.

No More PATCOs

A new element in the battle was the involvement of the federal government — not only threatening Local 21 members with the revocation of their Transport Worker Identification issued under Homeland Security, but in mid-January indicating that Coast Guard vessels would accompany the scab grain ship going to Longview.

This was the first time the federal military was used against organized labor in the United States since military air traffic controllers were called out by Ronald Reagan during the crushing of the air controllers' union PATCO in 1981, and before that with Richard Nixon's use of federal troops in the postal strike of 1971.

Protests arose from unions and labor councils from California to Wisconsin, with ILWU Local 10 activist Anthony Leviege stating that the Longview battle was "a watershed struggle for organized labor. No more PATCOs."

Shortly after the Coast Guard did escort a vessel seemingly destined for Longview, news broke that negotiations had resumed between EGT and the ILWU on January 23rd. Initially only legal matters were discussed, but shortly afterward the Local 21 picket lines came down. The ILWU was again recognized as the bargaining agent in Longview and workers began unloading a ship there on February 7.

Finally on Thursday, February 9th, members of Local 21 voted to ratify the contract, all the terms of which are still not clear. What is clear, however, are the political dynamics that led to some resolution of this struggle, which has been described in local papers as the largest labor battle in 30 years.

The fact that Governor Gregoire of Washington expressed major concern over the proposed Occupy mobilization led longtime Local 10 militant Clarence Thomas to state: "When the Governor intervened a year ago, nothing was settled. It wasn't until the rank and file and Occupy planned a mass convergence to blockade the ship that EGT suddenly had the impetus to negotiate. ... Labor can no longer win victories against the employers without the community."

Jack Mulcahy, officer of ILWU Local 8, also observed, "Make no mistake — the solidarity and organization between the Occupy Movement and the Longshoremen won this contract." Likewise, Jess Kincaid of Occupy Portland noted:

"The Occupy Movement and rank-and-file unionists both within and outside our ranks have forced the company to settle, but this is not over. ... EGT and its parent company Bunge bribe the government for military escorts, use slave labor in Brazil and systematically avoid contributing anything to our social safety net in the US or abroad. There is no ethic here beyond putting money back in the pocket of the 1% at the cost of working people and the sustainability of the earth."

It is in struggles like this one, centered in Longview, where more and more young activists and union members see the nature of our system laid bare.

March/April 2012, [ATC 157](#).