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USA

Occupy, longshore workers challenge anti-union bosses

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Time Magazine designated its “Person of the Year 2011” as “The Protestor.” To make clear that its reference was to what the editors considered the most important development of the year, *Time* added to its cover-page headline: “From the Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow.” Its feature story began, “No one could have known that when a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire in a public square, it would have ignited protests that would topple dictators and start a global wave of dissent. In 2011 protestors didn’t just voice their complaints, they changed the world.”

Time, among the most popular mainstream news magazines in the United States, has a point of sorts. No one can predict whether a specific event will ignite mass struggles that can change the course of history. But history does repeatedly demonstrate that the importance and interconnection of seemingly isolated events depend in great part on the historical context in which they take place. Today this context is the worldwide crisis of the capitalist system and the total incapacity of the ruling rich to offer any solution other than deeper incursions into the quality of life of working people everywhere.

In this context, the Occupy movement’s resounding proclamation of the class divide—“We are the 99 percent; the bankers, corporations, and their government are the one percent”—has been seared into the consciousness of millions. In the blink of an eye, yesterday’s impossible challenges can today become the order of the day. The nearly 40-year virtually uninterrupted series of concessions and defeats imposed by capital against labor can be reversed only on the condition that the 99 percent organize to fight back, and that in the course of this fightback a mass revolutionary socialist party is constructed to challenge the capitalist system itself.

A seemingly instant turn of events was sparked by the late December call of the relatively small numbers actively engaged in Occupy Oakland to mobilize a mass force in January to help embattled International Longshore and Warehouse Workers Union (ILWU Local 21) workers challenge a major union-busting effort by the EGT corporation. EGT’s union-busting ship, to be escorted by the U.S. Coast Guard, military ships and helicopters, and an expected mass force of land-based police and military personnel, seeks to dock and upload a grain cargo at its new \$200 million non-union facility.

This won’t be the first time that EGT has moved to make its scab facility operational. Last July, 1000 ILWU members and supporters responded by blocking a train carrying grain to the Longview terminal. And again, on Sept. 7, according to a flyer distributed by Local 21, “400 union supporters blocked a grain train in Vancouver, Washington, and then again in Longview. The next morning hundreds of longshore workers arrived from all the Northwest ports before dawn, and news media reported thousands of tons of grain ended up on the tracks. The ports of Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Vancouver and Portland were shut down—the workers were all in Longview.”

Today, ILWU Local 21 and the Bay Area-based ILWU Local 10 have joined to put some teeth into Occupy Oakland’s call for a January mass mobilization in Longview. They are supported in this effort by the San Francisco Labor Council, which will be joining a Solidarity Caravan headed for Longview. The labor council, which subsequently approved \$1500 toward the caravan’s expenses, passed a Dec. 19 solidarity resolution that states:

“Whereas, EGT Development, a joint venture of multinational corporations Bunge, Itochu and STX Pan Ocean, agreed to hire union Longshoremen when accepting millions in taxpayer funds to build a massive grain exporting terminal at the Port of Longview, and once the terminal was built has tried to void its contract and has refused to hire ILWU labor, ...

“Whereas, with the use of police and courts and the 220 arrests in the 225-member ILWU Local 21, EGT has managed to get enough grain across ILWU picket lines and into the terminal that EGT appears poised to load a ship soon in violation of their agreement with the Port of Longview, ...

“Whereas, an ILWU Local 10-endorsed solidarity caravan of union members and community activists from the Bay Area is being organized to bolster our brothers and sisters of ILWU Local 21 in Longview, WA, for an emergency mass protest when requested to do so, therefore:

“Be It Resolved that the San Francisco Labor Council endorses the solidarity caravan, will spread the word about the caravan to its membership and constituency groups, and encourage their participation.”

Similarly, the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Counties (Washington) Central Labor Council adopted a Jan. 2 resolution stating in part: “It is estimated, sometime in late January or early February the [scab] EGT facility at the port of Longview will receive its first grain ship to be loaded at its berth. The name and timing of this ship will undoubtedly be kept secret until the last possible moment. It is likely there will be a few days to as little as 24 hours notice of when the ship will dock. Notification will be given via the Internet and any other relevant means of networking throughout the country.

“We are imploring all able working-class people willing to take time out of his or her own lives, to come to Longview, Washington for a historic protest. ...

“The class struggle never really goes away. Right now the rich and the ruling class are attempting to deal a blow that labor might never recover from. The ILWU has always been the vanguard of labor everywhere. Today, the ILWU’s value of “An Injury to One, Is an Injury to All” couldn’t be any more pertinent for all organizations. So please, if you believe in a better future for the 99% of us that work for a living, do what you can to support ILWU Local 21.”

The stakes in the Longview ILWU struggle are high. If EGT’s planned scab-operated effort is successful, the door will swing open for the corporations to attempt to smash unionized ILWU port workers on the entire West Coast—one of the most important union bastions in the country. As with the massive defeats they imposed on the United Automobile Workers in recent years, the government and bosses now seek to take their pound of flesh from the ILWU. They aim to reduce labor costs to the near minimum wage rates that have been imposed on other once powerful unions.

A defeat in Longview will resound throughout the world—as will a union victory. The highly unionized West Coast ports are the point of entry and departure for commodities worth hundreds of billions of dollars that are traded on world markets. The historic ILWU victories against powerful corporate and government forces in the 1930s and 1940s were a product of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike of 65,000 workers that won the union collective bargaining rights, model wage scales, benefits, and working conditions that persist to this day.

“Third-party” pickets

The Occupy Oakland call to close down the port of Longview was no idle bluster. It was the Occupy Oakland activists who first issued a call for a city-wide “general strike” on Nov. 2 to protest the police attack a few days earlier that had demolished the encampment at Frank Ogawa Plaza (renamed Oscar Grant Plaza by the Occupiers) and brutalized peaceful Occupiers with tear gas, pepper spray, and clubs. A police-fired missile that night that smashed the skull of the encampment leader and U.S. Marine veteran of the Iraq War, Scott Olsen, was a shot heard around the world.

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The reaction shocked more than a few when 30,000 working people mobilized in response to shut down a good number of Oakland's banks and other corporate institutions and the multi-billion-dollar Port of Oakland itself. In the face of this power in the streets, the very city officials that ordered the crackdown felt compelled to instruct their subordinates that no punishment was to be implemented for city and country workers who chose to join the "general strike."

In solidarity with the Longview workers and with some 22 Los Angeles truckers fighting for a union contract who were fired by a port corporation owned in part by Goldman Sacks, Occupy Oakland's General Assembly proceeded to organize for a Dec. 12 West Coast port shutdown, in which 6000 protesters took part in Oakland alone. Support was won from the Longview ILWU Local 21 members, from the Los Angeles Labor Council and from several unions up and down the coast. Major efforts were undertaken to win the solidarity of ILWU workers at most of the West Coast ports.

This partially successful second effort to challenge the bosses' austerity drive and organize solidarity for port workers from Los Angeles to Longview caused a bit of a stir in the labor bureaucracy. Some ILWU officials and other class-collaborationist labor bureaucrats argued, for the first time, that "third-party pickets"—that is, Occupy Oakland supporters and their allies who mobilized at the docks up and down the state—were flaunting what they called the "democratic right" of ILWU members to decide whether or not to engage in solidarity actions.

The corporate press and employers took it a bit further, claiming that the Occupy-initiated pickets were causing ILWU members to lose pay.

This was a peculiar development, and especially so in light of the ILWU's longstanding tradition, and the contract provision won in struggle, that allowed the union to respect third-party picket lines when the "health and safety" of ILWU workers was in question. For decades, the ILWU ranks have utilized this "health and safety" contract provision, as well as others, to respect political picket lines and to effectively demonstrate solidarity with working-class causes around the world.

Over the years, the ports of Oakland and San Francisco, and sometimes the entire West Coast, have been periodically shut down for 24 hours, and sometimes longer, in solidarity with a broad range of struggles. These have included the fight against South African apartheid, protests against the slaughter of Salvadoran trade unionists by that nation's then death-squad government, freedom and justice for Mumia Abu-Jamal, opposition to non-union ships arriving from unionized ports in other countries, and antiwar actions demanding the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

These political and symbolic strikes have been widely acclaimed by trade unionists and social activists. The implication that today's one-day port shutdowns to defend ILWU Local 21 are done behind the backs and against the wishes of ILWUers is not credible, and especially so when Local 21 and a broad range of other trade unionists clearly understand the major threat posed to the entire labor movement.

ILWU International President Robert McEllrath's Jan. 3 statement entitled, "Prepare to take action when EGT vessel arrives" was issued to all ILWU locals. The statement expresses the union's solidarity with Local 21's cause and condemns the employers, government, and anti-union laws like Taft-Hartley that restrict solidarity pickets.

But McEllrath's statement appears to differ in at least one critical aspect from the call for mass mobilizations issued by Local 21 and Local 10 and the San Francisco and Washington State Labor Councils. These organizations appear to be aiming their calls for solidarity to the coast-wide ILWU ranks and to the broader labor movement and its allies in the Occupy movement. Understanding that any confrontation with police and military authorities to thwart the operation of the EGT scab terminal must entail a labor and allied mobilization of massive proportions, not only in Longview but at all West Coast ports, they have not advised ILWU locals to refrain from mobilizing in Longview. By

implication they seek to not only close down Longview but the entire West Coast.

McEllrath's statement, in contrast, takes great pains to do the opposite. It reads, in part: "Locals need to be aware of the narrow path that we must cut through a federal labor law (the Taft-Hartley Act) that criminalizes worker solidarity, outlaws labor's most effective tools, and protects commerce while severely restricting unions. Because Local 21's labor dispute is with EGT, federal labor law entitles the Local to conduct picketing and other collective actions directed at EGT. Further, while the NLRB, which administers Taft-Hartley, sought and received an injunction in federal court on behalf of EGT against the ILWU and its members, the federal court denied the NLRB's motion to ban picketing at the EGT facility in Longview, preserving our First Amendment rights to peacefully picket the company.

"The NLRB is currently seeking a second injunction, this time on behalf of PMA, on the theory that any disruption of work by the ILWU on the West Coast docks at the same time that the Union is protesting EGT constitutes a violation of Taft-Hartley. However, we have no dispute with PMA or its member companies. Thus, any showing of support for Local 21 at the time that a vessel calls at the EGT facility must be measured to ensure that the West Coast ports have sufficient manpower so as not to impact cargo movement for PMA member companies. A call for a protest of EGT is not a call for a shutdown of West Coast ports and must not result in one." (Emphasis added.)

McEllrath's statement also cautions ILWUers as to the severe penalties, including imprisonment, that might be imposed on would-be Longview protesters. And while condemning the government's anti-worker collusion with corporations, McEllrath warns ILWU leaders to "take extreme caution" against those who might take non-ILWU-sanctioned actions against EGT.

Experienced trade unionists have long been aware that the ILWU and many other unions have often been compelled to take great care in their formulations to the ranks in order to avoid government-aided company attempts to impose serious fines and other sanctions against unions that exceed the limitations imposed by contracts. Indeed, most all of the politically powerful ILWU solidarity actions and one-day strikes over the years have been formally conducted in the name of ILWU members' "concern" over their "health and safety" should they cross a third-party picket line aimed at closing down a port. Few believe, however, that any of these third-party pickets would pose a serious threat to an ILWU member's safety.

This must be kept in mind when evaluating the statements of President McEllrath. The test of his fealty to Local 21's cause will be in life itself, not in the words that might have been crafted to legally protect the union against massive employer damage claims. If the ILWU leadership mobilizes the mass forces necessary to seriously confront the planned scab operation in Longview, a battle of the first order is in the works. If not, the Longview struggle may well be lost, but nevertheless seen as an important component in labor's coming fightback.

One critical point seems clear. The ILWU International president's statement expressing solidarity with Local 21, however restricted, and its pledge to aid in the upcoming protests at Longview, would not have become a reality were it not for a dedicated small group of Oakland Occupiers and the solidarity they have lent to an ILWU local that faces destruction at the hands of a boss class that has hitherto run roughshod over workers around the world.

Workers' pent-up anger explodes worldwide

The Longview struggle takes place in the context of working-class mobilizations around the world. These include the mass mobilizations that forced the resignation of the U.S.-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt (though the victories are still incomplete), the eight or more one-day anti-austerity general strikes in Greece, the mobilizations of millions in France that challenged the degradation of the pension system, the millions in Spain who occupied public plazas to

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protest the government's austerity measures, and the 150,000 workers who occupied Madison, Wis., for a month to challenge the state's abolition of public employee collective bargaining rights.

Today's majority-supported Occupation Wall Street movement proved to be the spark that ignited the anger and pent-up class hatred of never-ending government and employer attacks on workers, oppressed nationalities, students, and youth in the United States. The 99 percent are coming to understand that their interests are diametrically opposed to those of the ruling-class rich and its government.

This government was quick to respond to the challenge to its political hegemony. In short order it systematically organized, military style, its ever-growing repressive police/military apparatus across the country to demolish virtually every one of the close to 1000 Occupy sites. In the course of a few weeks 5000 innocent protesters were arrested, many brutalized and jailed.

The power elite understood the modest campsites and meeting places of a few score to several hundred activists as the physical symbol of a challenge to its legitimacy, and thus deemed them unacceptable. The elite did not foresee that the brutal removal of Occupiers along with their tents and equipment would galvanize hundreds of thousands across the country.

The Occupiers found a receptive audience when they championed virtually every demand of the oppressed and exploited, including opposition to capitalism's wars, its racist discrimination, its attacks on public education and soaring tuition, its increasingly for-profit and privatized prison-industrial complex, and its bail-out of multi-billion-dollar banks and other financial institutions at the expense of working people. Today, the call initiated by Occupy Oakland to stand in solidarity with beleaguered longshore workers is being watched closely around the world.

The shift in the public mood has been rapid and remarkable. A December 2011 Pew poll found that among young people in the age bracket of 19-29, 49 percent preferred socialism over capitalism. Forty-three percent favored capitalism. "Despite all of the declarations that socialism is dead," said the Chicago-based education publication Substance News, "a growing minority of people, especially the young, see socialism as a more human alternative." The Pew survey found that in the general population 60 percent to 31 percent favored capitalism over socialism. Among Blacks 55 percent favored socialism as against 36 percent favoring capitalism. The figures mark a significant change from a similar Pew poll taken a year ago.

It is unfair to expect the Occupy Wall Street movement to spearhead the inevitable class battles to come. But history will record that at a time when capitalism's offensive was at full blast, Occupy was part of a series of struggles that evidenced the capacity of working people to resist and fight back. Such was also the case with the 2006 one-day strike of five million immigrants to protest planned punitive immigrant legislation.

Today Occupy stands tall as an example of what a dedicated core can accomplish if its politics and demands reflect the highest aspirations of the masses for a better life. Occupy's solidarity with ILWU Local 21 and its encouragement of a mass effort to reverse yet another ruling-class offensive will not be forgotten.

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