

Bias in the Corporate Media: What goes unreported when discussing labor on the waterfront

By James Preston Allen, Publisher

After nine months of negotiations between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Pacific Maritime Association (the shipping and terminal operators), the crisis of congestion at West Coast ports has finally come to the attention of President Barack Obama. He has dispatched his labor secretary Tom Perez to San Francisco to intercede and possibly break the impasse in the final details of the talks, which may come down to a disagreement over just one man—the Southern California arbitrator, Dave Miller.

As the press blackout and closed-door negotiations continue, speculation abounds as to the cause and the consequences of the continued slowdown at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, with the added refrain, “Longshoremen are the highest paid blue collar workers in the nation.”

The corporate-owned media historically uses wage disparity as a wedge to divide workers, but they have short memories when reporting on the much greater income disparity between the middle class and the increasingly wealthy 1 percent. In these reports on the pay scale of dockworkers, they accurately report a wage between \$26 and \$41 per hour, which when compared to the pay of a Walmart greeter, the difference is huge. However, if you simply look at the Port of Los Angeles Police Department ad on page 3 of this edition, you will find that they are hiring new officers with only basic education and an ability to swim for something close to \$40 per hour.

Similarly, if we look at the pay scale of other unionized workers in Los Angeles County or elsewhere on the West Coast—be they firefighters, police, Teamsters (although not the local troqueros) or those in the movie and entertainment industries—\$40 per hour might just be the average. Even the Silicon Beach techies who have less time on the job than most dockworkers, get starting salaries equal to or greater. Sure, one can argue about value of training or physical risk on the job, but what compensation really gets down to is a percentage of the cost of the value being delivered by the work provided. In the specific case of the shipping industry that brings an estimated \$2 billion a day in trade to our ports, the cost of labor is somewhere around 3 percent of the PMA’s cost of doing business.

However, these comparisons never seem to make it into the corporate media’s business reporting that again blames workers for the woes of the economy. Have you heard about the compensation levels of the CEOs of the great shipping companies, who are paid enormous salaries even when their corporate balance sheets show a loss for the year? Never! So clearly this issue of how much the ILWU workers are paid is not the real issue here, nor is the issue of their health care benefits, which was settled months ago.

The key stumbling block to settling this contract at this point comes down to the local arbitrator, who as it turns out, is a retired ILWU man receiving a union pension, but who is now so distrusted by the union that they want him out. And, the PMA is willing to risk continued congestion, lost profits and interruption of the national supply chain over retaining one pro-management, union turncoat? This would seem like an easy fix if not for the perpetual finger pointing of the PMA—enhanced by the other media. It’s not always easy to discern the bias in their reporting.

Yesterday, as I was reviewing various business news reports on the global handwringing over rotting farm exports and the stalled supply chain, I realized that some in the corporate media don’t have the faintest idea about the difference between a “strike” and a “lockout.” What the PMA has executed over the last few weeks is, by definition, a “lockout”—meaning they did not call the workers to the job. A “strike” or “job action” is when the workers refuse to go to work. The PMA perpetrated the former, while the latter hasn’t happened during these protracted negotiations, which shows significant restraint on the part of the ILWU.

The Los Angeles Times recently called the ILWU a “militant union.” If this isn’t bald-faced bias masquerading as journalism, then I don’t know what is. Sure, one might see facing down McCarthyism in the 1950s as a militant act, indeed, one that took great courage considering the political ramifications. But sitting at the negotiation table for nine long months without a contract and not calling for a strike is hardly the militancy of the 1934 general strike. Different times call for new strategies, perhaps.

So what is this editorial about then? My critics are sure to point out that I am just as biased toward the union as the others are against. All I can say is that this is an opinion column clearly defined as such and I don’t pawn it off as unbiased journalism. I make no bones about my own and this newspaper’s longstanding support for the workers in the Harbor Area and their humble protest against corporate greed and the exploitation of the American worker.

You can disagree with me, as some of you do, and I will even print your rebuttals when others will not. But when you look at the growing monopoly of corporate-owned media on all levels in America today, it’s hard to believe that they could be called “liberal” or “fair and balanced.” Clearly they are not.