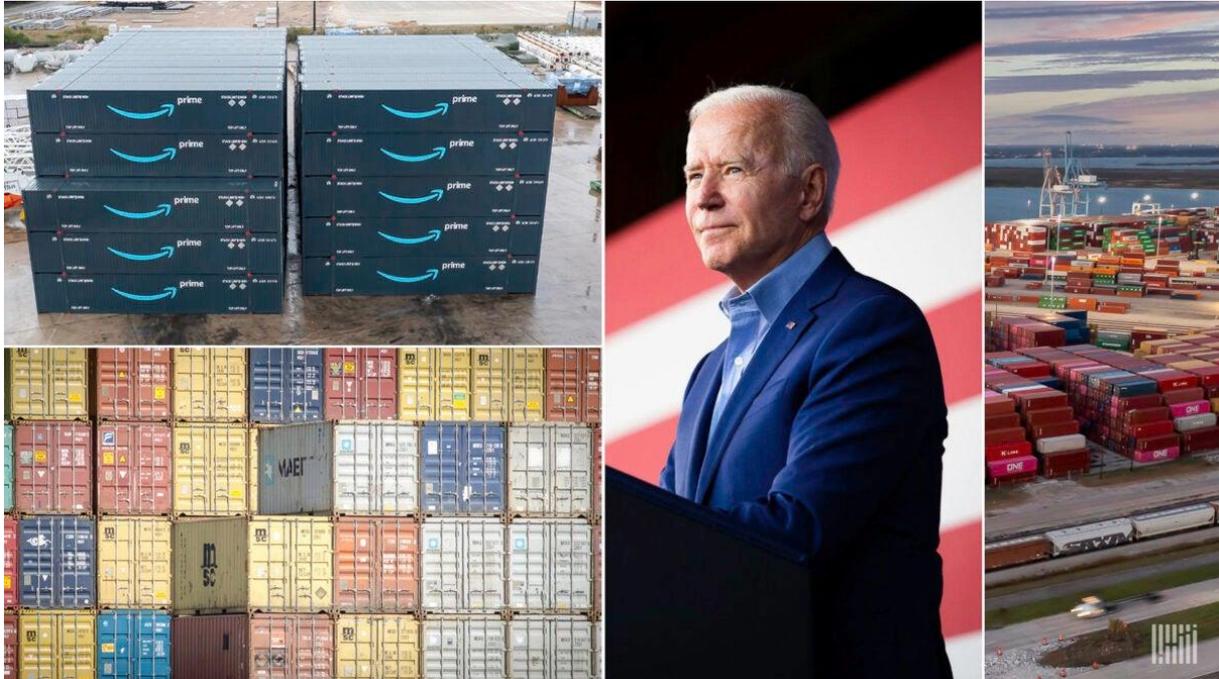


Report: Biden won't block dock strike

International Longshoremen's Association has set Oct. 1 strike deadline at East and Gulf Coast ports

[Stuart Chirls](#)

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President Biden won't intervene in a potential East Coast dock strike. (Photo: Jim Allen/FreightWaves)

President Joe Biden won't intervene to prevent a strike at East and Gulf Coast ports by union longshore workers, according to a published report.

The federal Taft-Hartley Act grants presidents powers to intervene in labor disputes that threaten national security or safety by imposing an 80-day cooling-off period, and forcing employees back to work while negotiations continue.

"We've never invoked Taft-Hartley to break a strike and are not considering doing so now," a Biden administration official told Reuters.

"We encourage all parties to remain at the bargaining table and negotiate in good faith."

Union dockworkers are prepared to strike Oct. 1 when the current master contract expires, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) again emphasized, according to the news report.

In 2023 acting Labor Secretary Julie Su helped negotiate a new contract between West Coast port employers and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

A coalition of shippers on Tuesday called on Biden to help restart contract negotiations between employers and union dockworkers, and said he should be ready to "step in" to prevent a strike at U.S. ports.

The ILA, representing 45,000 employees at three dozen ports from Texas to Maine, has said its members will walk off the job if a new contract is not in place by Oct. 1. Disputes over wages and automation have brought bargaining to a standstill.

The first ILA work stoppage in nearly 50 years would halt ocean container traffic and other cargo as shippers bring in import merchandise for the critical holiday retail season. Employers are expressing increasing concerns.

A coalition of 177 trade groups ranging from retailers, manufacturers and automakers to farmers and transportation providers in a letter asked Biden to “restart stalled negotiations” between the ILA and employers represented by the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX).

“[W]e call upon the administration to immediately work with both parties to resume contract negotiations and ensure there is no disruption to port operations,” the coalition stated in the letter, a copy of which was obtained by FreightWaves.

The coalition said a strike would compound existing supply chain challenges, including attacks on commercial vessels by Houthi militia that have disrupted vital shipping routes through the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

The trade group pointed out recent successful efforts by the White House during negotiations between railroads and their unions, and between UPS and the Teamsters. Neither involved Taft-Hartley.

“A strike at this point in time would have a devastating impact on the economy, especially as inflation is on the downward trend,” the coalition wrote. It said Biden should be ready to “step in” to prevent a shutdown of ports.

“We are coordinating with partners across the supply chain to prepare for any potential impacts,” said Steve Burns, spokesman for the Port Authority of New York-New Jersey, the busiest container port on the East Coast. “[W]e urge both sides to find common ground and keep the cargo flowing for the good of the national economy.”

Port employers reiterated their calls for the ILA to return to the bargaining table.

“We have tremendous respect for the ILA and its members, but it is disappointing that we have reached this point where the ILA is unwilling to reopen dialogue unless all of its demands are met,” USMX said in a statement. “The only way to resolve this impasse is to resume negotiations, which we are willing to do at any time.”