

# Could East Coast port strike spread to West Coast?

ILWU has pledged to support ILA in contract fight

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Container cranes await the next vessel at APM Terminals' facility at the Port of Los Angeles. (Photo: Jim Allen/FreightWaves)

Could a work stoppage by East Coast longshoremen spread to West Coast ports?

That's the nontrivial question facing shipping lines, terminal operators and the country at large as U.S. East and Gulf Coast port employers nervously wait out an Oct. 1 strike deadline set by the International Longshoremen's Association.

The current six-year ILA master contract covering dockworkers and other port employees from Maine to Houston expires Sept. 30. No contract talks have been scheduled.

The primary issues are wages, benefits and automation. Employers represented by the United States Maritime Exchange (USMX) have publicly said without disclosing details that they have made good-faith offers to the union, which represents 45,000 workers at three dozen ports. The union in refusing to consider any offer has framed it as a fight for fair wages against "greedy" foreign companies raking in billions in profits on the backs of American workers.

Now, the International Longshore & Warehouse Union has thrown its considerable weight behind the ILA. The ILWU represents tens of thousands of dockworkers at West Coast ports, including the Port of Los Angeles-Long Beach complex, the busiest containerized gateway in the U.S.

"As you continue negotiating and move close to the expiration of your contract, the ILWU stands in solidarity with the ILA for a fair contract that respects dockworkers and protects our jurisdiction," said ILWU International President Willie Adams, in a letter Aug. 16. "From coast to coast, the ILWU and the

ILA remain militant and resolute in our fight against automation. We will not settle for a substandard deal that does not adequately address our concerns about the future of our workplace and the safety of our members.”

The ILWU in August 2023 ratified a new master contract with employers.

The ILA ports handle about half of the nation’s trade.

Adams’ letter has led to speculation that the ILWU could strike in sympathy, particularly with regard to vessels diverted from East and Gulf Coast ports. But one expert says that the possibility of an extended stoppage is unlikely.

“Since there is an existing contract on the West Coast, there could be perhaps a one-day stoppage, but there are no grounds based on the ILA situation on which the ILWU members can strike,” said Susan Kohn Ross, an attorney specializing in customs and trade at Mitchell Silberberg & Knupp LLP, based in Los Angeles, in an email exchange. “So, if they were to do so, I would expect the carriers would get an injunction forcing the longshore workers to go back to work, post-haste!”

To this point there has been “surprisingly little” cargo rerouted to the West Coast, Ross said, although she added that seems to be starting to change.

Ross also recalled the West Coast longshore strike of 2012. Unionized workers initially garnered substantial public support and succeeded in shutting ports down. “Workers went on strike and a lot of people were on their side — until the amount of the wages was published,” Ross said.