

Unions returning to work at Canada ports

Labor board orders containers hubs to resume operations

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(Screengrab from Port of Montreal video)

Canada's busiest maritime gateways will be handling containers again after the Canada Industrial Relations Board ordered the Port of Montreal to resume operations as of Saturday morning.

Longshore workers returned to the ports of Vancouver and Prince Rupert in British Columbia on Thursday, just days after Canada [ordered an end](#) to a lockout of longshore unions by port employers.

The board acted on a request Tuesday by Labor Minister Steven MacKinnon to formally end the work stoppage and send the labor contract disputes to binding arbitration. The government said the ongoing labor disputes were hurting the economy, and with it Canada's global trading reputation.

The Port of Montreal said it would comply with the order as of 7 a.m. Saturday.

The port in an update posted to its website said that it could take several weeks to process containers currently at the port or due to arrive in the next few days. A total of 5,000 twenty-foot equivalent unit containers are on the property, with 55,000 linear feet of rail boxes to handle and 22 vessels on their way or waiting at anchor.

Vessel operators have been waiting at anchor for the dispute to be resolved. Railroads CN and CPKC suspended intermodal train service to the trade gateways. It could take several weeks for operations to return to normal.

The ports' order marks the second time this year that Ottawa had to intervene in a labor dispute.

In August, Canada [ordered CN and CPKC](#) to end a brief lockout of rail unions that had shut down the rail network.

MacKinnon is scheduled to meet with the railroads Nov. 20 in Ottawa to discuss the labor situation.

Speaking at a rail conference Friday in New York, a frustrated Keith Creel, CPKC chief executive, said that the time may have come for Canada to designate railroads and ports as essential services. That would forbid strikes if a stoppage would put the safety or security of the public at risk.

“The unions can’t get a deal ratified,” Creel said. “That’s a problem. If Canada doesn’t have ports working and trains working, than the economy will cease to exist. I believe in the rights of workers, but designating rail and perhaps ports as essential services maybe makes too much sense.”

The British Columbia Maritime Employers Association representing ocean carriers and terminal operators at the Port of Vancouver, the country’s busiest container hub, and the Port of Prince Rupert on Monday locked out the International Longshore and Warehouse Union after a threatened strike in a dispute over scheduling of forepersons.

In Montreal, the Maritime Employers Association locked out Canadian Union of Public Employees Nov. 10 after workers rejected a final contract offer. That capped months of intermittent job actions by the union that operators of the port’s four container terminals said had hurt business to the point they were forced to lay off some employees.

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