

PMA in latest move seeks to restrict night shift labor

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The Pacific Maritime Association launched a game of brinksmanship on New Year's Eve, notifying the International Longshore and Warehouse Union at Los Angeles-Long Beach that beginning Friday, employers on night shifts will dispatch only one longshore crew to work each vessel, rather than three as has been the norm.

In a letter to the employers' organization today, the ILWU said this "reckless unilateral action of reducing manning" will exacerbate congestion and cause even more vessels to back up at anchor at the busiest U.S. port complex.

PMA spokesman Steve Getzug said terminal operators are making a strategic decision to focus labor resources on the container yards, which are experiencing severe congestion, due in part to the refusal of the ILWU since late October to dispatch sufficient skilled equipment operators at the Los Angeles-Long Beach complex. The employers' intention is to release containers from the yards to cargo interests as quickly as possible.

The ILWU went on the offensive today, notifying terminal operators at Los Angeles-Long Beach as well as specific importers around the country such as Macy's that the union is prepared to work. ILWU representative Adan Ortega, in an interview with JOC.com, said 700 dockworkers in Southern California will be available for dispatch on Friday's night shift. Ortega said the ILWU is urging individual terminal operators to disregard the PMA's decree and call out full work crews.

Also, the ILWU locals in Southern California said they will try to head off implementation of the one-crew decree at a meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. Pacific time on Friday. Ortega said the ILWU offered to meet with PMA representatives, and the employers agreed to meet with the union's locals at the ILWU hall in San Pedro.

Ortega said the current, slack season lull in trans-Pacific cargo volumes was viewed by both sides as an opportunity for the ports to catch up and relieve the backlog of containers that has accumulated. The ILWU has stated all along that port congestion is due to a variety of operational factors, such as a surge of cargo from big ships, shortages of chassis and a trucking capacity crunch. The ILWU has denied that it is engaging in work slowdowns..

In addition to congested container yards, the port complex continues to sustain vessel backlogs. The Marine Exchange of Los Angeles-Long Beach reported today that six container ships were at anchor and awaiting berths — one more than on Wednesday.

Ortega released a letter sent to Macy's that said that "in a New Year's Eve surprise," the ILWU was notified by the PMA that employers in Los Angeles-Long Beach, beginning Friday, were "drastically reducing the number of workers that would be called to unload ships." The letter said that PMA's actions will "increase congestion at the port, presenting challenges to retailers such as Macy's."

Ortega said a normal longshore crew, or gang, as it is referred to on the waterfront, is comprised of two crane operators, one signalman, four dockworkers under the hook and eight UTR, or tractor drivers. Therefore, instead of assigning three gangs, or 45 workers against each vessel, terminals on night shifts will be assigning only one gang of 15 longshoremen, he said.

Employers' say the ILWU has been intentionally shorting terminal operators on skilled labor in the terminal yards since October in order to gain leverage in the coastwide contract talks that have been underway since May 12. Therefore, the ILWU is at least in part responsible for creating yard congestion, the PMA charged.

Employers will devote more resources to the yards. "To focus efforts on clearing containers from the terminal yards, and get them moving to final destinations, PMA will be reducing the number of workers ordered to unload ships on night shifts," Getzug said. The practices for the unloading of vessels on the day shifts in Los Angeles-Long Beach will not be changed, he said.

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