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PMA member carriers needed at negotiating table

ILWU calls for the direct participation of key PMA decision makers in negotiations

SAN FRANCISCO (December 29, 2014) – The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) said today that the PMA member carriers sitting on PMA’s Board of Directors need to come to the negotiating table so that direct and constructive dialogue between key decision makers can take place. “Both sides need the right people in the room to get things finalized,” said Robert McEllrath, ILWU President and Chairman of the Union’s Negotiating Committee. “Sure, my counterpart, Jim McKenna, has been involved in negotiations from the start, but all the decisions are made by the carriers sitting on PMA’s Board of Directors.”

The 11 members of PMA’s Board of Directors are largely carriers but also are the chief officers of the largest terminals, none of whom have had any direct participation in negotiations since the parties began bargaining in May. PMA’s principal decision makers have not yet, in seven months of bargaining, had a single face to face meeting with union negotiators. In contrast, the Union has its principal decision makers, a member-elected Negotiating Committee comprised of local union representatives and International officers, at the bargaining table. “Indirect negotiations won’t get us over the finish line. The few issues that remain unresolved relate directly to the carriers and these key carriers need to come to the table,” said McEllrath.

West Coast ports have been plagued all year with a carrier-caused congestion crisis that has frustrated customers and made work on the docks much more dangerous and difficult. The congestion crisis began prior to the start of contract negotiations and well before PMA began using the ILWU slowdown allegations to deflect criticism from its member carriers. Despite efforts to blame the ILWU, industry experts agree that the West Coast port congestion problem resulted from a number of industry-based decisions and mistakes, including, but not limited to:

- Carriers ceasing to provide chassis to move containers off the terminals.
- Carriers outsourcing their chassis pools to remote locations causing bottlenecks.
- Terminal operator’s hoarding limited chassis at the expense of competing terminal operators.
- Shippers and consignees using containers on chassis as mobile storage units – thus exasperating the chassis shortage.
- Carriers building new “mega-ships” with 14,000 plus containers that overwhelm terminal capacity and capability.

- More -

- Carriers increasingly entering noncompetitive alliances with each other and squeezing terminal operators and port authorities.
- Terminal operators and stevedores squeezing labor on traditionally negotiated jurisdiction in response to pressure from carriers.
- Truck driver shortages because the industry forces a piecemeal wage model.
- Tight intermodal rail capacity brought about from the political push of “energy” trains into an already squeezed rail infrastructure.

Last week, PMA member employers in the ports of Seattle and Tacoma compounded congestion problems by refusing to use critical night shifts for import/export cargo in an apparent effort to provoke an even deeper congestion crisis that they hoped to blame on the ILWU. By refusing to order manpower for night shifts, PMA unilaterally and self-servingly restricted work to eight hours a day at the peril of both importers and local exporters. At the same time, PMA member terminal operators in the container ports of Portland, Oakland, Los Angeles and Long Beach continued to work night shifts.

PMA’s Texas based public relations firm ratcheted up a media campaign against the ILWU in late October, in hopes of pinning the congestion crisis on workers. The effort backfired given the numerous, non-labor related causes of the ongoing congestion at West Coast ports. “The men and women who work the docks up and down the West Coast can’t fix the current supply chain failures and industry experts know it,” said McEllrath. “The irony of PMA’s slowdown allegation is that, in addition to dishonestly blaming workers for current congestion problems, it obscures the fact that PMA member companies are working behind the scenes to trigger labor disputes in order to cut labor costs and consolidate more control over workers on the docks. We’ve seen all this before. Our singular focus at this moment is getting a good contract for the members of the ILWU. I think we’re almost there.”

Twenty-thousand West Coast port workers have been without an agreement since July 1, 2014.

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