

## Strike leaves Saint Lawrence Seaway at a standstill



**Cargo moves in and out of the Great Lakes have been stymied as workers from Unifor, the labour union representing workers at Canadian ports and locks along the Saint Lawrence Seaway, commenced a strike action late last week.**

[Barry Parker](#) | Oct 27, 2023

Strike action came as negotiations with the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp (SLSMC, previous known as the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority) failed. The Seaway runs from Montreal, Quebec, inbound to the Welland Canal at the western side of Lake Ontario. The “locals” (chapters of the larger Unifor) on strike were based at St. Catharines, Ontario (local 4211, 4212), Brossard, Quebec (local 4319, 4320) and Brockville, Ontario (local 4323).

SLSMC had asserted that “Progress at the table continues to be slow as the high union wage demands could potentially lead to increasing tolls to a level that would make the waterway less competitive and eventually increase the price for the goods that transit through it.” Unifor had said: ““We negotiated in good faith right up to the last moment, but we cannot allow workers' rights to be

compromised. We remain open to discussion and hope that the employer will reconsider its position for the good of all."

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At the time of the strike commencement, on 21 October, SLSMC had pegged the number of vessels in the Seaway at "more than 80... of which 40 are ocean-going vessels." The cargo mix moving through the Seaway totalled 36.3 million tonnes (with 4,000 vessel transits). Leading cargoes were grains (just under 10 million metric tonnes), iron ore (6.2 million mt) and coal (1.8 million mt). Other drybulk cargoes totalled 11.7 million mt, with liquid bulk moves of 3.5 million mt.

As the strike began, the SLSMC had said that: "An orderly shutdown of the system took place during the 72-hour notice period allowing for vessels to safely clear the Seaway system, and the Corporation remains in regular contact with the marine industry. Currently, there are no vessels waiting to exit the system, but there are over 100 vessels outside the system, which are impacted by the situation." Seasonality is a factor in the timing of the strike (workers had gone without a contract since the Seaway opening in early 2023); agricultural interests were concerned as the strike comes at the time of peak exports of grain.

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*Illustration source MarineTraffic showing vessels on Lake Ontario outside of Welland Canal*

From the American side, there was outrage. The American Great Lakes Ports Association (AGLPA), a trade group composed of US ports, said: "At our ports, stevedores and longshoremen have no ships to unload, marine pilots are out of work, trucking companies have no deliveries to make, and tugboats are idle. Our customers are making plans now to reroute their products through East Coast ports...The casual pace at which the parties and the Canadian Government are approaching the resolution of this crisis is an outrage."

ALGPA went on to assert: "A 2020 economic analysis determined that a two-week closure of the Seaway would result in the loss of more than 19,000 jobs in the United States and Canada. With a week now wasted, and many days of negotiations still pending, these job losses are certain."

A mediation session will commence on Friday, 27 October. Unifor said: "Following notice from the federal government, mediation between the union and the employer will take place in Toronto on Friday, Oct. 27, 2023." It added that: "Unifor will comply with the call to mediation and will continue to support members on the picket line while talks take place."

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