

Another maritime strike brewing

Labor storm clouds loom over UK ports

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On Friday, Unite the Union announced it registered a dispute over the increased medical standards on maritime pilots in the U.K. (Photo: Shutterstock/Anita van den Broek)

The fluidity of U.K. port trade is threatened again with another possible jobs action by Unite the Union.

One cannot forget the [series of labor strife](#) in the summer and fall of 2022 impacted U.K.-bound trade to the U.S. for months. [Ford's supply chain](#) was one of the high-profile examples of such disruptions. The year of union workers knowing their worth and flexing their muscles continues.

Today, shippers are waiting to see if Associated British Ports (ABP) is willing to go toe to toe again with the men and women who generate the profits. Trade takes people. Just when you think the labor issues are resolved between employers and union, another set of possible problems pop up. ABP's ports handle one-quarter of U.K.'s seaborne trade and over \$183.7 billion in trade.

Earlier Friday, Unite the Union announced it registered a dispute over the increased medical standards on maritime pilots. This registration marks the beginning of the negotiation process.

APB Ports introduced these new standards in July. In its press release the Union described the standards were imposed "without any consultation," which is required under Unite's health and safety legislation recognition agreement.

"Unite is not opposed to enhanced checks but they need to be negotiated and introduced fairly," said Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham. "ABP needs to realize that Unite stands ready to defend our members' jobs, terms and conditions."

In a news release, Unite said there have been no negotiations and no details about how these medical tests will be done or what happens if a member fails.

"This is a serious concern as ultimately members' jobs could be at stake," the release states.

Unite members facing the increased health measures are in South Wales (Swansea, Port Talbot, Barry, Cardiff and Newport), Southampton and the Humber (Port of Hull and Immingham), but Unite warned, "the dispute could be wider and impact all 21 ports operated by ABP."

"Maritime pilots are scarce, skilled and highly experienced," Graham said. "Ships can't leave or enter the U.K.'s ports without them. So, it's all the more incredible that ABP Ports is refusing to negotiate important changes to their health and safety."

The pilots are in charge of the safe passage of vessels in waterways and ports. Unite said that under The Pilotage Act 1987, pilots are already required to hold medical certificates.

Unite regional coordinating officer Jane Jeffery said: "Pilots must be in a good physical condition to tolerate the physical stresses of boarding and landing ships. Unite is not opposed to enhancements, but we do expect the company to honor our agreements, honor health and safety legislation and enter into meaningful consultation."

At the time of publication, ABP did not respond to American Shipper's request for comment.