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American port union doubles down on anti-automation rhetoric

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Port Authority of New York & New Jersey and CMA CGM Group

Last week's historic port strike across America's eastern seaboard might have been put on hold until a new president occupies the White House in the new year, but union bosses remain adamant that their demands must be met or further industrial action will be inevitable in 2025.

The three-day port strike across the US east and Gulf coasts came to an end on Thursday night after dockworkers struck a tentative deal with port operators.

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) announced that the union had reached an agreement with the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) on wages, suspending their walkout until January. Work resumed at the 36 ports involved straight away.

Both sides said in a statement they would return to the bargaining table to negotiate all outstanding issues while their existing contract would be extended through to January 15.

The hierarchy at the ILA hailed in a release over the weekend the "unprecedented" 61.5% wage increase spread over six years.

However, union bosses reiterated their determination to make sure that their labour contract contains commitments not to automate operations.

“The fight against automation is not just about job preservation; it is about ensuring that ILA members continue to play an essential role in port operations,” an ILA release stated, adding: “By extending negotiations, we aim to establish strong protections against the introduction of remote-controlled or fully automated machinery that threatens our work jurisdiction.”

Commenting on the release, Lars Jensen, who heads up Vespucci Maritime, a container consultancy, noted how American ports are already seen lagging when it comes to port efficiency, citing a recent World Bank container port productivity index where no American facility featured within the top 50 ports.

“A fight against automation where the aim, explicitly, is to preserve jobs will act as a brake on developing the competitiveness of US ports versus ports elsewhere,” Jensen argued.