

Canadian dockers locked out of BC and Montreal ports

A breakdown in negotiations and mediation at ports on both the west and east coasts of Canada, has left shippers reeling and dockers in a state of limbo, as unions accuse employers of a co-ordinated attack.

[Nick Savvides](#), Europe correspondent

November 12, 2024



Image: CUPE

Longshoremen in [Canada's](#) Montreal port were locked out on Saturday following the union's rejection of its latest contract offer, which the unions said had only cosmetic changes to the employer's last offer.

Michel Murray, spokesman for the Canadian Union of Public Employees Longshoremen's Union Local 375, told journalists: "When we look at what is happening, the lockout in Vancouver (and) the lockout in Montreal, we consider that it is a co-ordinated, planned attack in order to put pressure on the government to intervene."

Dockers were locked out of terminals at Vancouver and Prince Rupert ports on 4 November after the ILWU Local 514 issued a strike notice; carriers issued customer advisories that alternative calls will need to be made as the west coast ports are at a standstill.

Employer's representative BC Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) has said it is committed to the negotiating process, but the negotiations appear to be deadlocked after the latest round of mediation failed, with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) concluding it could not find a path to agreement and has not scheduled another meeting.

Despite the BCMEA's insistence that it has negotiated in good faith for the past two years, dockers' unions the ILWU Local 514 and the foremen's union argue that employers want to replace worker's jobs with automated terminals.

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In fact, the BCMEA in describing the dispute does not mention automation, except in generalities, posting that, "These agreements cover wages, benefits, hours of work, and employment conditions for over 7,400 longshore workers and foremen at Canada's West Coast ports. The latest agreements expired on March 31, 2023."

The BCMEA said it is committed to negotiations recognising the skills of BC's dockers, but it also wants to make certain the ports remain competitive.

Employers also accused the union of bargaining in "bad faith." And the union countered that: "The BCMEA and its members clearly don't want to reach an agreement even when federal mediators and the unions are standing by to continue talks."

Meanwhile, an academic from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, has come out in support of the dock workers.

John-Henry Harter, a Labour Studies and History lecturer at SFU said: "The biggest issue that the employer doesn't want to talk about, is automation. And that was a big issue in the summer of 2023 [when port workers in BC struck] as well."

Harter pointed to the BCMEA press releases that highlight how well dockers are paid and the strong offer made to unions, but the statements do not mention automation.

"Port automation has been an issue in port strikes across the continent in the past couple of years and is being adopted by port operators in a big way," said Harter, who added: "A 2018 report published by McKinsey & Company, entitled 'The Future of Automated Ports,' argued that automation could reduce operating expenses by 25 to 55% and increase productivity 10 to 35%."

ILWU member and International Transport Workers Federation inspector Peter Lahay argued that the BCMEA is attempting to demonise dockers, claiming that they are greedy.

But he counters: "This isn't a dock labour dispute this is a management dispute, given this lockout hangs on one key issue — automation versus job security at a couple of container terminals."