

Dockworkers on frontline of automation wars

North American port workers are battling plans to cut jobs and deskill the workforce, which employers say will reduce costs and drive productivity and efficiencies through automation.

[Nick Savvides](#), Europe correspondent

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Credit: CUPE

[Canadian](#) dockers' unions in Vancouver, Prince Rupert and Montreal are opposed to scheduling plans and automation, with staff representatives claiming that automation is not the panacea employers would have governments believe, while employers counter-claim that unions are trying to hold back progress.

In the [US](#) negotiations over similar issues are due to restart in January between east coast dockers and the employer's association the US Maritime Alliance (USMX).

Support for the dockers' unions has come from other sources who are concerned about the effects of automation on the broader community.

Bea Bruske, president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) told *Seatrade Maritime News* that workers from all Canadian provinces would lobbied MPs on 26 November: "There were over 150 meetings planned with legislators to discuss the issues around, job security and the wider implications of automation."

According to Bruske automation should not be used to decrease staff to sometimes unsafe levels, but should rather seek "bridging opportunities" such as training for new roles that would allow both labour and employers to achieve their goals.

CLC will in the near future release a report that looks at safeguarding jobs, said Bruske, which will not only protect workers, but whole communities who rely on taxes paid by workers to maintain critical services.

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“Machines don’t do taxes,” so automation must work for workers and should not replace them, argued Bruske.

Further support for unions came from a port source, who wished to remain anonymous, who said that terminal automation is not necessarily more efficient.

He said that while being shown around SSA’s [Long Beach](#) terminal by an executive, his host “wanted to show me [Long Beach’s] automated terminal.”

The SSA executive said this terminal is fantastic, but he added: “He [the automated terminal owner] is in \$2.1 billion of debt, I’m debt free.”

High upfront costs for automated terminals are one barrier to developing low labour terminals, but that is not the only challenge according to the [Federal Maritime Commission](#) (FMC), which has analysed the dispute between the ILA and the USMX,

The dispute in the US, according to FMC Commissioner Carl Bentzel, “Is political. Union officials are elected and the same is true on the management side, it’s in their best interests to get the best deal they can [for their electorate].”

According to Bentzel, “most of these disputes could be resolved at a local level, but with the leaders’ effectiveness in question it becomes more adversarial than it should be.”

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Bentzel added that he also had some sympathy with the union view that automation was not the panacea it was made out to be.

He had visited the [DP World](#) terminals in Europe some three years ago and the company found that its automated terminal was costly and less productive than manual labour in many respects.

“At that time DP World were retiring some of the technology, because they found that you could ramp up a human’s productivity, but not a machine’s,” explained Bentzel.

He said an experienced crane driver could make 35-40 moves an hour, whereas automated cranes operate at 24 moves.

He said automation in North European ports was easier because terminals in [Hamburg](#), [Antwerp](#) and [Rotterdam](#) handle around 80% of all continental cargo, whereas there are only a small number of US ports with the volumes to merit the vast investment in automation.

Long Beach was one of those facilities, but the FMC commissioner said: “Long Beach is hiring more labour because it needed maintenance and technical staff to maintain the technology, many of them were highly trained in computer science, and there were more of them, [than in a conventional terminal].”

“Automated equipment takes a lot of maintenance,” he added. According to Bentzel most US ports will be looking at semi-automation, which is mainly yard management, “there are very few facilities looking at gate or crane infrastructure,” he said, “Many US ports might only work one ship a day, so they don’t mind slowing the work down.”