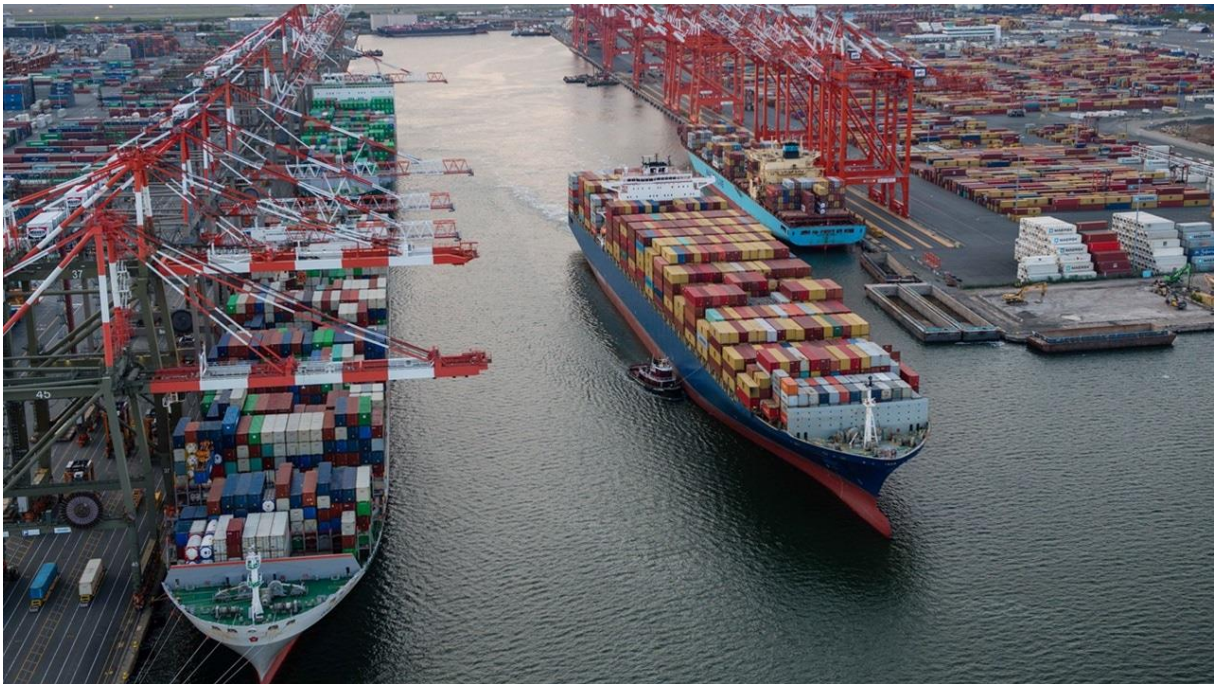


## Unions walk away from US East Coast ports contract negotiations

Talks between the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) have broken down over the key issue of automation bringing the threat of a renewed strike at US East Coast ports closer.

[Marcus Hand](#), Editor

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File Photo: Bayonne Terminal at the Port of New York and New JerseyCredit: PNANYNJ

The ILA walked away from negotiations with USMX scheduled to last for four days after just two days.

In a statement issued on 13 November ILA said, that the first day and half of talks had been productive. "However, late yesterday, talks broke down when management introduce their intent to implement semi-automation – a direct contradiction to their opening statement where they assured us that neither full nor semi-automation would be on the table. They claimed their focus was on modernisation, not automation."

The USMX similarly said initial talks had been positive but were unable to make progress on a range of technology. "Unfortunately, the ILA is insisting on an agreement that would move our industry backward by restricting future use of technology that has existed in some of our ports for nearly two decades – making it impossible to evolve to meet the nation's future supply chain demands," USMX said.

Employers said they are not seeking automation that will lead to the loss of jobs. "What we need is continued modernization that is essential to improve worker safety, increase efficiency in a way that protects and grows jobs, keeps supply chains strong, and increases capacity that will financially benefit American businesses and workers alike."

**Related:** [US port strike ends – unions and employers reach tentative agreement](#)

However, ILA clearly believe any form of semi-automation is simply the thin end of the wedge. "Their endgame is clear: Establish semi-automation now and pave the way for full automation later."

Automation has been at the heart of protracted negotiations for a new six-year port labour master contract. The ILA previously walked away from talks in June this year over the introduction of semi-automation and did not return to the table prior to the existing contract expiring on 30 September. The expiration of the contract led to a three-day strike at ports right along the [US](#) East and Gulf Coasts.

The strike ended with intervention from the Biden administration, which was supportive of the unions. A tentative agreement was reached with an improved 62% wage increase from employers over the six-years of the contract. However, the agreement is provisional on the two sides returning to the bargaining to resolve other outstanding issues, including automation by 15 January 2024.

Analysts expressed caution on the likelihood of an agreement given the lack of progress previously made on the issue of semi-automation and automation previously, noting nothing had changed.

As part of the tentative agreement the ILA retained the right to strike if issues could not be resolved by 15 January next and new collective bargaining agreement reached.

**Related:** [ILA retains right to strike in US East Coast contract negotiations](#)

The ILA stated a renewed strike would be a tool of last resort. However, commented on the three-day strike in October the union said: “This strike demonstrated our resolve, and while wages were a major hurdle, we believed – and still believe – that further progress can be made at the bargaining table while our members continue their hard work.”