

Union, employers resume war of words in East Coast port contract dispute

Technology at East and Gulf Coast ports at issue as ILA, USMX trade accusations

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The war of words resumed this week between port employers represented by the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX), and the International Longshoremen's Association union and their 45,000 workers at East and Gulf Coast ports.

The sides had agreed to a media blackout when contract negotiations resumed following a three-day strike by the union that shut down container handling in early October. But that ceasefire was apparently abrogated after the ILA [broke off talks](#) Nov. 13, accusing employers of trying to force automation technology language into a new master contract.

The union on Monday renewed its efforts to sway public opinion by reposting on its Facebook account an image of an ILA flag with the message, "If it's a fight they want, it's a WAR they're going to get." The image was seen frequently online and on picket lines during the strike.

Also on Monday, ILA Executive Vice President Dennis Daggett, son of President Harold Daggett, in an email wrote that the union was at a "crossroads" in contract negotiations over employers' "push" to use semiautomated rail-mounted container gantry cranes (RMGs) on the docks.

"The ILA is not against progress, innovation, or modernization," Daggett wrote, "but we cannot support technology that jeopardizes jobs, threatens national security, and puts the future of the workforce at risk," wrote Daggett.

The security reference comes just days after the U.S. Coast Guard issued a directive to ports warning that communications technology in some container cranes made in China could pose a threat to maritime operations.

Daggett further argued that the cranes are actually 95% automated, up until “the last six feet” when an operator loads a container on a truck chassis.

The statement referenced a joint study by the International Dockworkers Council and International Transport Workers Federation showing longshore workers generating greater productivity than automated equipment.

“This isn’t about meeting operational needs — it’s about replacing workers under the guise of progress while maximizing corporate profits at the expense of good-paying, family-sustaining U.S. jobs,” Daggett stated.

The USMX on Tuesday countered with its own statement, saying, “Modernization and investment in new technology are core priorities required to successfully bargain a new Master Contract with the ILA – they are essential to building a sustainable and greener future for the U.S maritime industry.

“Port operations must evolve, and embracing modern technology is critical to this evolution. It means improving performance to move more cargo more efficiently through existing facilities – advancements that are crucial for U.S. workers, consumers, and companies.”

The USMX stated that it “is not, nor has it ever been, seeking to eliminate jobs, but to simply implement and maintain the use of equipment and technology already allowed under the current contract agreements and already widely in use, including at some USMX ports.”

The employers said modern technology is the only way to move significantly more containers given the limited available land at most East and Gulf Coast ports. The statement claimed a USMX-affiliated port where RMGs were deployed more than a decade ago saw a doubling of container volume, and corresponding doubling of union jobs. The statement did not identify the port.

“We cannot risk moving the industry backward with unworkable restrictions on the implementation of modern technology already in use – and permitted by the existing contract,” the statement said. “Strategic investment in new technology and modernized operations does not mean fewer jobs. Instead, it will create new opportunities for the ILA. We need a Master Contract that allows us to plan for the future and to ensure that the ILA are our partners in charting this path forward.”

A spokesman for the ILA said the union is still not conducting interviews with the media. The USMX did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.