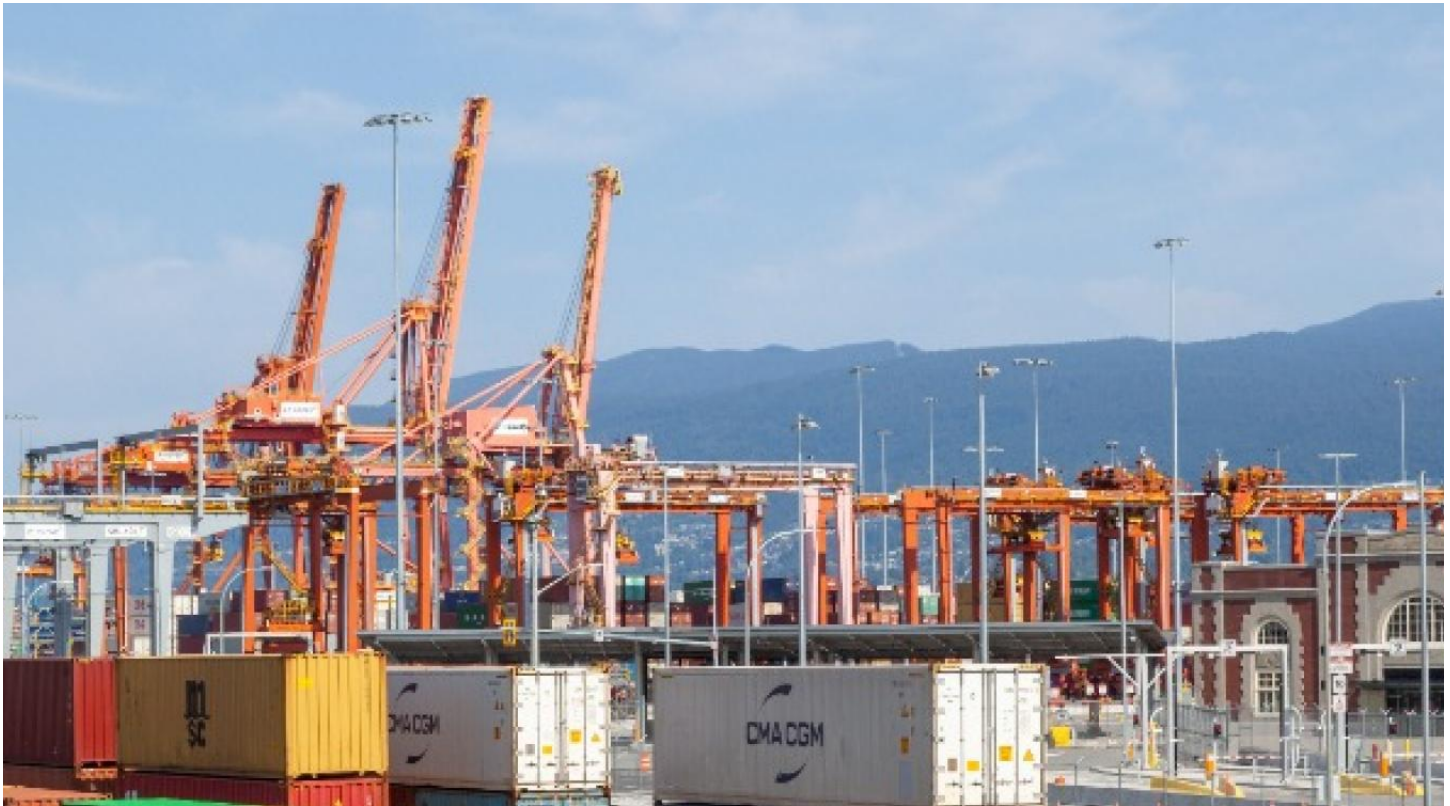


Longshore workers at Western Canadian ports returning to work, for now



ILWU Canada said it was remaining steadfast in seeking increased jurisdiction of maintenance work at marine terminals in Vancouver (pictured) and Prince Rupert. Photo credit: JHVEPhoto / Shutterstock.com.

Mark Szakonyi, Executive Editor | Jul 19, 2023, 1:52 PM EDT

Longshore workers at Western Canadian ports are returning to work – for now — after a labor board ruled that strike action taken Tuesday night by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada was illegal because the union failed to provide the required 72-hour notice.

But with the union subsequently giving that notice after the ruling by the Canada Industrial Relations Board, dockworkers are now poised to go on strike again on Saturday morning. The board ordered ILWU Canada to review potential damage claims with marine terminals over the strike action that was taken illegally Tuesday night.

The whiplash developments were set in motion late Tuesday when a caucus of ILWU Canada rejected the tentative labor agreement that last week ended the 13-day strike at the ports of Prince Rupert and Vancouver. The rejection came just five days after the end of the strike and as ports had begun to restore cargo flow after the disruption.

“The term of the collective agreement that was given with today’s uncertain times is far too long,” ILWU Canada President Rob Ashton said in a statement, referring to the four-year length of the tentative agreement meant to replace the contract that expired at the end of the March. “We must be able to readdress the uncertainty in the world’s financial markets for our members.”

ILWU Canada said it was remaining steadfast in seeking increased jurisdiction of maintenance work at marine terminals, noting that after achieving record profits in 2021 and 2022, employers had the financial resources to appropriately compensate workers for higher living costs.

The British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) bemoaned that the full ILWU Canada rank-of-file wasn’t able to vote on the tentative agreement. In rejecting the deal, ILWU Canada was “choosing to further harm Canada’s economy, international reputation, and most importantly, to Canadians, their livelihood and all those that rely on the stable supply chain,” BCMEA said in a statement late Tuesday.

Government ministers ‘looking at all options’

Canada’s ministers of Labor and Transport on Wednesday expressed grave disappointment in the union's rejection of the agreement, saying they "are looking at all options" and would have more to share publicly on Thursday. The joint statement from Labor Minister Seamus O'Regan and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said the tentative agreement was a "fair and balanced deal," and ports needed to be open.

Terms of the tentative deal were not disclosed.

Attention now turns to Canada’s Parliament to end the strike, as it did at the Port of Montreal in 2021.

When the strike began July 1, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the Retail Council of Canada urged Parliament to order port workers back to work. But there is no guarantee of swift passage of the legislation Parliament must pass for that to happen. It will likely take a coalition from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party and the Conservative Party to overcome the Democratic Party’s objections to any back-to-work legislation.

Parliament is currently in recess, having begun its summer break in June.

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