Dockworkers at Los Angeles-Long Beach and Seattle-Tacoma picked up their productivity a bit this weekend, but the situation turned bad in Oakland when members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union walked off their jobs for three consecutive shifts.

Nevertheless, congestion remains a serious problem at U.S. West Coast ports, and the failure of negotiators for the ILWU and Pacific Maritime Association to reach a contract settlement continues to hang like a dark cloud over the entire U.S. West Coast.

Spokesmen for the ILWU and PMA confirmed that negotiations were held in San Francisco through the weekend and again on Monday. The ILWU has been working without a contract since July 1, though, and with no grievance machinery in place, longshoremen at the individual port level have been able to take matters into their own hands.

The PMA last week issued two press releases accusing the ILWU in Los Angeles-Long Beach of intentionally filling only about 50 percent of the positions for skilled equipment operators in the container yards. Certain container-
handling machines must be worked by longshoremen specifically trained for those jobs, so depriving a terminal of skilled labor immediately affects productivity throughout the facility.

Container terminals at the largest port complex in the Americas have been severely congested since late summer, with at least a dozen factors contributing to the problems. The ILWU contribution to the mix has overwhelmed the terminals, and vessels continue to back up at anchor because berths are full.

Capt. J. Kipling Louttit, executive director of the Marine Exchange of Southern California, said eight container ships were at anchor Monday morning. That is down from nine on Sunday and 10 last Thursday. “There is flow,” he said, but six to ten vessels at anchor is not a good sign given that at normal times all ships proceed directly to berth.

Terminal operators in Southern California reported that over the weekend the union was filling a higher percentage of skilled-labor positions than they did last week, which the employers took as a positive sign.

For more than a week, longshoremen in Seattle and Tacoma have been operating at 50 percent or less of normal crane productivity, according to the PMA. Reduced productivity on ship-to-shore cranes affects the entire operation, and also leads to container backlogs in the yards and vessel delays at berth.

Employers in the Pacific Northwest responded to the slowdowns by ordering a full slate of workers each morning, but after a couple of hours of poor productivity, the terminals dismissed the workers, paying them only for two hours of work.

The situation improved somewhat over the weekend. Linda Styrk, seaport manager in Seattle, said container lifts per crane, per hour, jumped to about 20 from 14-15 last week. As a result, employers kept dockworkers on their jobs for the entire shift, which helped to relieve some of the pressure on the facilities. However, crane productivity is still only 50 percent of normal.

Port of Tacoma spokeswoman Tara Mattina said terminals also began to add more gangs to each vessel, which likewise helped to relieve pressure on the yards. Nevertheless, the container backlog continues to congest the terminals, and some terminals have begun to reject export loads, she said.

This comes at a bad time for exporters of apples and other Pacific Northwest crops. Styrk said growers in eastern Washington are predicting a record crop this year. Growers would like to ship as much of their product as possible in chilled containers in order to optimize price levels, but there are a limited number of reefer plugs at the terminals, so apples are going into storage.

Oakland until this weekend was the only West Coast port to escape serious ILWU disruptions, but longshoremen this weekend walked off their jobs for three straight shifts. An ILWU spokesman said the walk-offs took place after the longshoremen uncovered mechanical defects that needed to be addressed.

Longshoremen in Oakland reportedly demanded that the lug nuts on all equipment be checked when a machine was found to be defective.

As if the longshore problems were not enough to cause concern in Los Angeles-Long Beach, the port complex has also been put under a Teamsters union watch. Some harbor truck drivers on Friday addressed the Los Angeles Harbor Commission to protest a lack of progress by the port and Mayor Eric Garcetti in addressing trucker problems in the harbor.

The Teamsters this year have been attempting to organize three harbor trucking companies at LA-Long Beach where drivers charge they are being classified as independent contractors, which by law cannot be unionized. The drivers,
with Teamsters support, say they should be classified as company employees, which would make them eligible for unionization and higher wages and benefits.

The drivers addressed the Los Angeles Harbor Commission in July, seeking the support of the port and the mayor. Garcetti brokered a cooling-off period. On Friday the drivers returned to the commission, saying no progress had been made and a strike was possible. When the drivers in July picketed marine terminals where the targeted trucking companies call, the ILWU refused to cross the picket lines. With no grievance mechanism in place, the terminals were unable to seek a review from the local arbitrator to determine if the picket lines were valid under the contract.

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