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Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor | Nov 03, 2014 8:13PM EST

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union late Monday rejected accusations that they were engaging in a concerted effort to slow down cargo-handling operations at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma, saying waterfront employers' charges are a "bold-faced lie."

The dueling press statements by the PMA earlier Monday and the ILWU later in the day are a disconcerting development and could indicate there are serious problems in the coastwide contract negotiations that have been underway since early May. The ILWU has been working without a contract since July 1.

PMA earlier in the day released a statement — the first solo statement by either party since May — saying the ILWU initiated orchestrated slowdowns in Seattle and Tacoma that reduced productivity by 40 to 60 percent. The PMA, which negotiates and administers the West Coast waterfront contract, said the ILWU's actions violated a joint agreement the employers and the union announced last summer that normal cargo-handling operations would proceed until a new contract is negotiated.

"No such agreement was ever made, nor could it be made given the parties' historic disagreement regarding the definition of 'normal operations,'" the ILWU stated in its release. The ILWU said the definition of normal operations has been the subject of arbitrations for decades.

Both sides have been tight-lipped so far about the issues that have prevented them from reaching a contract settlement for the past four months since the previous contract expired. However, the ILWU statement may hint at two of the issues.

The union accused employers of "pressure tactics which include, among other things, secretly trying to shift away thousands of ocean container chassis traditionally handled and maintained by longshore workers and refusing to bargain a training program that properly trains longshore workers and prevents non-qualified workers from operating dangerous equipment."

Maintaining jurisdiction, especially over chassis maintenance and repair, was a major issue in contract negotiations two years ago between the International Longshoremen's Association and USMX on the East Coast. It appears now to be equally as explosive an issue in the West Coast negotiations.

Training longshoremen to work the new jobs created by automation, and repairing the sophisticated equipment that will move containers throughout the yard with very little human

intervention, also appears to be a key issue. The TraPac terminal in Los Angeles is the first on the West Coast to begin to automate its operations, and that company has accused the ILWU in Southern California of hard-timing its operations to force favorable manning requirements.

This exchange of press statements by the PMA and ILWU is a setback in the contract negotiations.

“Today’s unilateral media blitz by PMA will only delay progress at a critical point in the contract negotiations. Delays at the negotiating table are also reflected in the growing congestion problem at major West Coast ports,” the ILWU said.

The union said port congestion, which has crippled operations in Los Angeles-Long Beach for months, is due to chassis shortages and dislocations under a new chassis model implemented by shipping lines, a shortage of truck drivers in the harbor and a shortage of rail car capacity that has caused containers to back up on the docks.

“PMA’s media offensive is designed to smear the union and to deflect responsibility from a growing congestion problem that is plaguing major West Coast ports,” the ILWU said.

If there is a silver lining in the verbal sparring that took place on Monday, the PMA and the ILWU each stated that they want to continue negotiating in good faith. “The ILWU has called for talks to resume on Wednesday,” the ILWU stated.

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