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Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor | Nov 03, 2014 3:25PM EST

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union is engaging in work slowdown actions at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma, waterfront employers say, raising fears that the tactics could spread to Los Angeles-Long Beach, the nation's largest container gateway.

According to the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents shipping lines and terminal operators in contract negotiations with the ILWU, the work slowdowns are directly related to the coastwide negotiations. The ILWU has been working without a contract since July 1.

PMA spokesman Wade Gates said that when the previous coastwide contract expired on July 1, both sides stated publicly that they would bargain in good faith and refrain from job actions or employer lockouts because of the economic impact work stoppages and slowdowns would have on the national economy.

"Now, the ILWU has reneged on that agreement," Gates said Monday.

The PMA issued a statement Monday saying the work slowdowns began Friday in Tacoma and spread to Seattle over the weekend. "The PMA has found that the slowdowns at these Pacific Northwest ports have resulted in terminal productivity being reduced by an average of 40 to 60 percent," the employers' organization stated.

Employers demanded that the ILWU workers return to normal workplace practices and productivity, and when those efforts failed, the terminals began sending workers home early, paying them only for the few hours worked on each shift.

The PMA is convinced these actions are orchestrated by the ILWU leadership. "We have been told that ILWU business agents sent the slowdown orders out late last week," Gates said.

If the work slowdowns spread to Southern California, the impact could be devastating. Los Angeles and Long Beach have been reeling from severe congestion for weeks now, with vessels waiting for hours at anchor for berths and truck delays mounting. The port complex accounts for more than 70 percent of container traffic on the West Coast.

The ILWU on Monday night said the charges were a "bold-faced lie." The union accused the PMA of undertaking a "media blitz" aimed at besmirching the ILWU and deflecting blame for LA-LB congestion.

This story was altered Monday evening to reflect the ILWU's reaction to PMA accusations.

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