LONG BEACH, California — Long truck lines and a shortage of skilled labor plagued the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach Tuesday, adding to the ports’ already deep congestion problems and instilling fears among importers and exporters of potential gridlock at the largest U.S. port complex.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific Northwest, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union is accused of continuing to engage in work slowdowns, which have gotten so bad that BNSF Railway began to cut off intermodal rail service from some interior locations to the Port of Tacoma.

Despite these crippling events, and continued reports of cargo diversions to U.S. East Coast and Canadian Pacific Coast ports, the ILWU and Pacific Maritime Association have not even met at the bargaining table since late last week to engage in contract negotiations. The ILWU has been
working without a contract since July 1.

Cargo interests across the country are enraged. The West Coast inertia comes at the worst possible time for agricultural exporters who are completing their second straight year of record harvests.

“As the West Coast ports melt down, terminals closing, ships skipping port calls or rerouting, chassis unavailable, truckers limited by endless lines at gates and unreasonable hours of service restrictions, we see this having very real, very immediate injury to the U.S. economy and U.S. agriculture, our most important export,” the Agriculture Transportation Coalition said Tuesday from Washington.

Importers and exporters expressed their anger in a JOC.com survey published Tuesday. The respondents, who were asked to explain how they were coping with port congestion, and whose names are being kept anonymous, blamed shipping lines, terminal operators, chassis providers and the ILWU for the port congestion. “What is happening in L.A. should be illegal,” one frustrated shipper stated.

The congestion in LA-Long Beach has been building for months, with at least a dozen operational and labor-relations factors piling on each other to cause the worst port congestion since the employer lockout of the ILWU in the 2002 contract negotiations.

The ILWU this week intensified its efforts in Southern California to hard-time employers. Terminal operators said that on the evening shift Monday and the day shift Tuesday, the ILWU dispatched only those longshoremen who have been “certified” to operate the transtainers used to move containers around in the yards.

There are dozens of longshoremen in Southern California who are “qualified” to operate the yard equipment because they have many hours operating the machines, but employers have not yet put them through a formal training program. Those longshoremen are normally dispatched to operate the transtainers when the certified longshore labor force is used up, but terminal operators report that the ILWU refused to dispatch the qualified workers beginning Monday night.

This action is especially damaging for the terminals because the yards are already at capacity, and until they are decongested, the terminals must delay vessels from docking. As a result, vessels have been waiting at anchor for berths. The Marine Exchange of Los Angeles-Long Beach told JOC.com Tuesday six container ships were waiting at anchor.

The PMA and ILWU on Monday issued press releases in which they blamed each other for the labor-related problems. Both organizations said on Tuesday they would issue no formal statements.

Monday’s statement from the PMA alleged that longshoremen since last weekend were working very slowly in Seattle and Tacoma, reducing crane productivity by 40 to 60 percent. Employers responded by calling out work gangs for each shift, and then sending the longshoremen home after two hours because they continued to work slowly. The workers were only paid for two hours. Employers said Tuesday nothing had changed in the PNW and workers were still being sent home after two hours.

The ILWU and PMA had been negotiating a new contract since May without experiencing any significant work slowdowns or employer actions, so the past week’s slowdowns in the Pacific Northwest and the sudden skilled labor shortages in LA-LB could indicate that dangerous times
are coming. On the other hand, both organizations said they intend to resume contract negotiations, possibly on Wednesday.

The lack of productive port work in the Pacific Northwest generated an immediate response from BNSF Railway to discontinue sending intermodal trains to the ports from some inland locations. Spokeswoman Amy Casas said the railroad is exercising caution in originating traffic that can’t be or won’t be processed.

“Doing so would consume resources necessary for serving all of our customers across the network,” she said.

Harbor trucking companies in LA-Long Beach have struggled with long lines and excessive delays since summer, and this week has not brought any relief, said Fred Johring, president of Golden State Express and chairman of the Harbor Trucking Association. “The turn times last night were terrible,” Johring said Tuesday. He said 31 percent of Golden State truck calls experienced turn times in excess of two hours Monday night.

One hour is considered an acceptable turn time in the harbor. Another harbor trucker reported turn times of more than one hour for 92 percent of its drayage calls during the day shift on Monday and 76 percent on the night shift.

Terminal operators in Southern California say ILWU inspectors this week began “red-tagging” as defective a number of cargo-handling machines at select terminals. Truckers confirm those reports. A trucker stated in a memo that “Terminal ____ has a red-tag party today.”

Truckers and cargo interests expressed disgust at such actions. They said that in times such as now when the ports are struggling with a dozen or more factors contributing to the congestion, longshoremen should be doing whatever they can to improve the situation.

The next big test for the ILWU in Southern California could come on Thursday night. The union contract allows the workers to schedule a “stop-work” meeting on one shift each month so the longshoremen can discuss union matters. The next stop-work meeting is scheduled for the evening shift Thursday. Truckers and cargo interests say the ILWU should forgo this month’s meeting rather than risk aggravating the congestion problems.

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