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US importers, exporters urge ILA to avoid shutdown

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The International Longshoremen's Association is targeting the hiring practices of US Southeast ports such as Charleston.

US importers and exporters are urging the International Longshoremen's Association to avoid a one-day East and Gulf coast port shutdown that some ILA officials have proposed to highlight state-level "government interference" in dockworker hiring.

"Thousands of companies and millions of workers rely on these ports and any disruption to their activity even for a day could have a negative impact on the US economy," said Jon Gold, vice president of the National Retail Federation. "While the union might have concerns with certain local government actions, engaging in a coastwide shutdown is not the answer."

The Agriculture Transportation Coalition asked Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao to work to discourage the International Longshoremen's Association from carrying out a threatened one-day work stoppage at East and Gulf coast ports.

AgTC said its members and the economy would suffer if the ILA halts work to protest the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor and the use of state employees as dockworkers in state-run South Atlantic ports.

No work stoppage has been scheduled, and ILA officials said none will be called until they've had time to speak with industry stakeholders and union members, some of whom have told JOC.com they're unenthusiastic about the idea.

Kenneth Riley, an ILA leader from Charleston, said members proposed the work stoppage and a Washington march to protest "government interference" by the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor and at state-operated South Atlantic ports that hire non-union state workers for some dockworker jobs.

United States Maritime Alliance, the ILA's management counterpart, warned the union that its coastwide contract "forbids any unilateral work stoppage by the ILA for any reason," and that if such a walkout happens, "USMX will enforce the contractual rights of its members to the fullest."

The National Retail Federation praised the ILA and USMX for opening informal discussions on a new contract far in advance of the current agreement's Sept. 30, 2018, expiration, but said even a one-day shutdown would run counter to that effort.

"We urge the ILA to reconsider its plans and avoid damaging the image of East Coast and Gulf Coast ports as reliable business partners for retailers and other shippers," the NRF said in a statement.

Peter Friedmann, executive director of AgTC, cited Chao's previous service as US maritime administrator and a US Federal Maritime Commission member in addition to heading the Labor Department under former president George W. Bush.

"We ask you to bring your experience and office to bear to prevent such a shutdown, and to protect the economy from injury that in some cases will be irreversible," Friedmann urged Chao.

Chao was labor secretary when West Coast ports were closed for 10 days in 2002 by a management lockout of the International Longshore Warehouse Union following ILWU slowdowns during contract negotiations. The lockout ended after Bush became the first president since Jimmy Carter to seek a back-to-work court order under the Taft-Hartley Act.

Friedmann noted that US agricultural exporters face intense foreign competition and can't afford to be seen as unreliable suppliers. A port shutdown "would be devastating to one of the most important sectors of the US economy," he said.

In a Labor Department-commissioned study in 2002, a consulting firm said shippers of perishable goods would be among those hardest-hit by that year's West Coast port disruption. The study, along with a follow-up on the 2002 lockout impact, was completed by Economics & Country Risk, a sister division of JOC.com within IHS Markit.

The study estimated that a 10-day West Coast shutdown would cut US annual GDP by \$2.6 billion and reduce that year's third-quarter GDP growth rate by 0.1 percent. Other studies, including one commissioned by the Pacific Maritime Association, had much higher estimates.

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