

Railroads set deadlines for accepting exports ahead of potential ILA strike



Railroads need to set a deadline to accept exports to ensure the containers reach the port before the gates are closed ahead of a possible strike by the ILA. Photo credit: AJ Packer/Shutterstock.com.

Ari Ashe, Senior Editor | Sep 24, 2024, 3:27 PM EDT

CSX Transportation, Canadian National Railway and Norfolk Southern Railway have set deadlines for exporters to drop off containers ahead of a potential strike by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) on Oct. 1, which would effectively shut ports along the US East and Gulf coasts.

The railroads can store some export containers after the deadline, but exporters will also shoulder the responsibility for holding their cargo if the labor dispute drags on.

CSX announced that refrigerated containers must arrive at terminals by Thursday to ensure delivery to the ports before a potential strike. Dry containers must be delivered

by Sunday. In case of a prolonged strike, CSX could also tap storage in Nashville and a dormant Atlanta terminal called Hulsey Yard.

CSX added that any containers stuck on the rail once the strike starts will not be accessible, and that it could not “guarantee if we get it to a terminal, the terminal/port will get it down before the potential strike.”

Canadian National, which has interchange agreements with CSX and its own direct service to Gulf Coast ports, will cut off exports bound for East Coast ports from Montreal and Toronto on Wednesday and Thursday, respectively. Exports through Gulf Coast ports must be received by Thursday, CN said.

Staggered schedule for NS

Norfolk Southern has issued a staggered drop-off schedule.

Exports in Chicago must be dropped off by Wednesday for Virginia International Gateway and by Thursday for Norfolk International Terminals, the two terminals at the Port of Virginia. The deadline for the Port of New York and New Jersey is Friday.

In Memphis, containers must be dropped off by Wednesday for Charleston and by Sunday for Savannah. In Atlanta, exports are due by Thursday for Charleston and by Tuesday for Savannah, NS said.

Cargo owners have additional time going to Savannah because the port has on-dock rail, unlike Charleston.

Exports from Cincinnati to Virginia are no longer being accepted, while cargo bound for New York and New Jersey must arrive by noon Wednesday. Exporters in Columbus have until Thursday for both Virginia and New York and New Jersey. Exports in Cleveland are no longer being accepted for either port.

If a strike does occur, railroads face the challenge of positioning enough railcars to keep freight moving. CSX and NS plan to stage railcars in Chicago and Memphis to ramp up operations once a resolution is reached, but space is limited. Other locations in Georgia, Ohio and Tennessee might be tapped to store other railcars temporarily. If railcars aren't positioned near key hubs, service disruptions may occur when operations resume.

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