

BC ports, longshore unions need new bargaining process: report



Canada's Labor Ministry urged a new structure where a province-wide contract is struck with British Columbia port employers rather than an agreement negotiated through local unions. Photo credit: Max Lindenthaler / Shutterstock.com.

Michael Angell, Senior Editor | Jun 16, 2025, 3:49 PM EDT

Fragmented union bargaining and government backstops during contract talks are factors behind the longshore strikes and other labor unrest that have gripped Canada's West Coast ports during the last two years, a report commissioned by the Labor Ministry report has found.

The report, released Thursday, suggests British Columbia's longshore unions need to bargain with employers on a province-wide basis, rather than a port- or employer-specific basis, to avoid further unrest that jeopardizes Canada's supply chains. It also urged early government intervention to head off strikes.

The 156-page report, which was commissioned by the Labor Ministry and developed by Canadian labor relations experts Vincent Ready and Amanda Rogers, looks into the labor disputes that have hit British Columbia's ports. It was commissioned in July 2023 by Labor Minister Steve MacKinnon after longshore workers rejected a contract proposal that led to a 13-day strike at Vancouver and other Canadian West Coast ports.

The inquiry found that while "there exists a mature bargaining relationship among the parties, it is far from healthy, and is marred by ongoing conflicts, misaligned priorities and a fiercely protectionist stance by the union."

Mike Leonard, president of the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA), said in a statement that if the report's findings are put in place, it "will advance long-term stability at Canada's West Coast ports to the benefit of all parties."

ILWU Canada could not immediately be reached to comment on the report.

ILWU locals control talks

The BCMEA negotiates contracts with the Canadian affiliate of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). ILWU Canada represents five separate, regional ILWU locals, which are the recognized bargaining agents with employers at different ports.

While ILWU Canada is ostensibly the main negotiator, it is the locals who direct contract talks, vote on tentative agreements and determine whether to strike. ILWU Canada is not recognized by employers as a union and its president does not have a vote on contract matters.

The report said that longshore labor negotiations would be more efficient if maritime employers could negotiate on a province-wide basis as "the current model of collective bargaining with different bargaining units is contributing to the frequency of labor disruptions." It noted that other longshore unions in Canada negotiate province-wide contracts.

The ILWU locals have maintained that different work conditions at each employer and port necessitate the need for regional representation. However, the report noted that ILWU local members can work at different ports throughout the province, indicating that work conditions at each location are similar enough for a province-wide contract.

"While it is true each ILWU local maintains its own independent leadership and union members, the issuance of a geographic certification will not interfere with those arrangements," the report said. It added that recognizing ILWU Canada or another

entity as the main union representative “will bring stability and certainty to future rounds of bargaining.”

Foremen role not distinct

The Labor Ministry’s inquiry coincided with another work stoppage in November 2024, when the BCMEA shut out ILWU Local 514, which represents port foremen, after it took an illegal strike vote during protracted negotiations with maritime employers.

Local 514 has separate bargaining agreements with each of the province’s maritime employers and can negotiate with each one separately.

However, Local 514 has “voluntarily” negotiated with the BCMEA for decades, the report said. Even though it started the last negotiations with the BCMEA, Local 514 targeted one employer — DP World — for a separate deal that led to the illegal strike vote.

“The union’s conduct was an attempt to single out one employer, just as the parties acquired their right to strike or lock out, and subverted the collective bargaining process that was underway,” the report said. “The union cannot ride two horses at the same time and then pick the one that best suits its interests late in the race.”

Local 514 maintains the foremen role is different enough than other longshore crafts for a separate union and contract. However, the report said foremen could also be rolled up into a province-wide contract because their jobs are not that different than other longshore workers.

“We do not accept that the interests of ILWU Local 514 members are so distinct that they cannot effectively be advanced as part of a geographic certification that also includes longshore workers,” the report said.

Government overshadows talks

The report also took to task the default move of maritime employers and longshore unions to look to government intervention when contract negotiations break down. The report noted that the federal government has intervened in nine of 13 British Columbia port disputes since 1972.

“This reliance on government intervention has created an environment where the safety net of binding arbitration overshadows the collective bargaining process,” the report said.

The inquiry suggested that a “special mediator” be appointed early in the bargaining process. The special mediator would monitor the progress of talks and help usher them through before the government needs to force a deal on both sides.

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