# Longshoremen avert strike with new contract agreement



Longshoremen along the East and Gulf Coasts of the United States have successfully negotiated a tentative contract agreement, averting a potentially damaging strike scheduled for January 16. The agreement, announced on Wednesday, was reached between the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), representing approximately 50,000 members, and the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX), an organisation representing shipping and port firms. This development is particularly significant as it concerns the employment structure and the introduction of automation technologies in ports spanning from Maine to Texas.

The contract spans six years and includes a substantial wage increase, with hourly pay set to rise by 62% over the contract’s duration, beginning with a 10% increase in the first year. The terms also address concerns about job security in light of advancing automation—which has long been a point of contention. Both parties expressed optimism over the agreement, emphasising that it aims to protect current union jobs while enabling port modernisation, which is framed as a way to enhance safety and efficiency.

In a joint statement, the ILA and USMX affirmed, “This agreement protects current ILA jobs and establishes a framework for implementing technologies that will create more jobs while modernizing East and Gulf Coast ports – making them safer and more efficient, and creating the capacity they need to keep our supply chains strong.” However, specifics of the contract, particularly regarding automation, were not made public as the ratification process by union members is forthcoming.

Sources familiar with the negotiations suggest that the agreement permits semi-automated systems at ports while ensuring that any new technology will necessitate the hiring of additional workers, thereby addressing the union's concerns about job losses. Full automation, which could potentially decrease the workforce, is currently excluded from the agreement.

The management had previously stressed the necessity of adopting modern technologies to enhance productivity and maintain competitiveness with more automated ports internationally, such as those in Rotterdam, Dubai, and Singapore. In stark contrast, the ILA had voiced apprehensions about the implications for employment, fearing that automation would lead to reduced job opportunities for longshoremen.

The significance of this agreement extends beyond immediate employee welfare, as President Joe Biden has commented on the broader economic implications. He noted, “Today’s tentative agreement between the International Longshoremen’s Association and the United States Maritime Alliance shows that labor and management can come together to benefit workers and their employers.” Biden commended the ILA for their contributions during the pandemic, suggesting that keeping ports operational is critical for the national economy.

Previous industrial actions also set the backdrop for these negotiations. The ILA had staged a three-day strike in October, which concluded when a prior wage agreement was reached, contingent upon sorting out automation issues before the impending January deadline. Economists had cautioned that a protracted strike would have severely disrupted operations along crucial coastal ports and would likely have triggered broader economic repercussions.

This deal follows renewed discussions between the parties, with both management and union leaders indicating a commitment to finding common ground to protect jobs while embracing technological advancements. As the ratification process proceeds, the landscape of US port operations will likely continue to evolve amidst ongoing discussions about automation and employment within this essential sector.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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