

# US dock talks reach agreement on health care benefits

A correspondent  
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Negotiators for West Coast shipping interests and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) reached agreement September 4 over a health benefit plan. The ILWU announced, "This is the first step in a long road to an agreement."

Several days earlier, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) and the union made a similar announcement claiming the benefit issue had been resolved, only to have the union retract after the company tacked on a change in the arbitration procedure. It is not clear to what degree the disagreement has been resolved. Both sides have continued negotiations, moving on to technology issues which have proven to be the most difficult to resolve.

The West Coast Waterfront Coalition, comprised of giant US retailers who import a large percentage of goods through the 29 West Coast ports, also voiced its opinion that the agreement on benefits was a "good sign in terms of making progress, but it's also good that both sides have taken down the rhetoric about who is stonewalling and not bargaining in good faith."

The coalition earlier this year met secretly with the Bush administration to request that the government impose Taft-Hartley provisions on the dockworkers. The ILWU later publicly exposed the threats made by Labor Department official Andrew Siff, who told ILWU officials that the Bush administration was prepared to occupy West Coast ports with the National Guard and use Navy personnel to move cargo if the union attempted a slowdown. He also threatened that the Bush administration would seek congressional legislation to declare the ILWU a monopoly, break up the union into separate bargaining units for each port and bar any joint strikes.

Meanwhile, a dispute emerged between the ILWU and the International Association of Machinists (IAM).

The machinists union charged that the ILWU is "raiding" IAM members at the ports. The IAM charged that the ILWU is seeking, through talks with the PMA, to have about 80 IAM members transferred to the ILWU.

The ILWU wants to place all jobs on the docks under its jurisdiction in return for agreement to let the PMA implement new technology measures that will eliminate large numbers of ILWU members' jobs. According to an IAM spokesman, the ILWU has "crossed swords" with other unions as well over the issue of absorbing its members.



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