No Immediate Lockout In Grain Shippers Union Dispute

STEVEN DUBOIS,Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Pacific Northwest grain shippers say there will be no immediate lockout at a half-dozen terminals along the Columbia River and on Puget Sound.

The owners had given the International Longshore and Warehouse Union until midnight Wednesday to accept what they describe as their "last, best and final" offer. But Pat McCormick, a spokesman for the owners, said there would be no midnight lockout. Instead, the owners will respond Thursday to comments received from ILWU representatives about the offer.

"I don't expect any job actions on either side in the near term," he said.

No additional face-to-face talks have been scheduled between the union and the Pacific Northwest Grain Handlers Association, the consortium of grain-shipping companies that operate facilities in Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, Wash., and Vancouver, Wash.

A disruption in the shipment of wheat, corn and soybeans to Asia would present a headache to farmers from as far away as the Midwest. More than a quarter of all U.S. grain exports and nearly half of U.S. wheat exports move through nine Pacific Northwest grain terminals.

The union has said it hopes the grain industry will avoid "the aggressive option of a disruptive lockout" and return to the negotiating table. Salary and benefits have not been the holdup during talks. Rather, the owners want to implement workplace rules they consider more advantageous.

"We obviously do not want the profitable grain companies to gamble with our lives, yet their 'last, best and final offer' rejects our safety code that was built over 80 years in the blood of workers killed on the job, and that many other waterfront employers follow," union spokeswoman Jennifer Sargent said.

The dispute involves six terminals that operate under a single collective bargaining agreement with the ILWU. The last contract expired Sept. 30.

The other Northwest terminals — based in the Washington cities of Longview and Kalama — operate under separate agreements with the ILWU. Representatives from the Grain Handlers Association have said since the start of negotiations that they are at a competitive disadvantage because the longshoremen at their terminals have more favorable workplace rules than those in Kalama and Longview.

The contract offer, a copy of which was leaked to The Oregonian newspaper, would take away some perks and grievance procedures. Other concessions include letting employers go to court to end work stoppages immediately and allowing supervisors to perform work during health-and-safety disputes, or if the union hiring hall can't supply enough qualified grain handlers.

The union said it doesn't consider the talks at an impasse and has offered additional negotiating dates.

"The union has been extraordinarily flexible in our attempts to reach an agreement with the multinational grain industry," Sargent said. "We've offered shift extensions, wage freezes, a rollover of our current agreement, and many more attempts to keep the grain flowing."

One of the grain shippers — Columbia Grain — is a tenant at the Port of Portland, and the contract dispute is the third labor issue to hit the port since June.

On Saturday, port officials and union leaders who represent marine terminal security guards narrowly averted a strike that would have effectively shut down three terminals.

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