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Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor | Jun 30, 2014 9:04AM EDT

SAN FRANCISCO — Criticism of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union by an official of the International Association of Machinists provoked an angry response at the Agriculture Transportation Coalition conference in San Francisco on Friday.

The IAM, whose members compete with the ILWU for maintenance and repair work at West Coast marine terminals, has been involved in a number of jurisdictional disputes with the ILWU over the years. Their competition for jobs could increase because technology and automation of cargo handling are eliminating some jobs, but are also creating new jobs.

Don Crosatto, area director of the IAM in Oakland, told the AgTC conference that maintenance and repair of cargo-handling equipment such as automated guided vehicles, automated straddle carriers and automated stacking cranes — machines that are being installed at two terminals in Los Angeles-Long Beach — will require a higher degree of training than ever before because of the sophisticated computer controls and electronics built into the machines.

Any breakdowns of the equipment can stop a container terminal dead in its tracks. “Employers want skilled workers. If it doesn’t work right, it is insanely expensive,” Crosatto said.

He said the IAM has a four-year apprenticeship program for its members, and the IAM is considering extending the program for a fifth year. By contrast, the ILWU plans to introduce the equivalent of 12 to 15 weeks of training on the new equipment, Crosatto said. He ridiculed such training by comparing it to someone taking a Red Cross course and then trying to pass himself off as a neurosurgeon.

Willie Adams, ILWU secretary-treasurer, who was in the audience, accused Crosatto of knowing nothing about the ILWU plans for training its maintenance workers, and he told Crosatto his comments were offensive. As an outsider, Crosatto had no right to “lambaste” the ILWU, Adams said.

Crosatto also commented on health care, which appears to be an issue in the ongoing negotiations between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association on a new contract to replace the one that expires at midnight tonight.

Crosatto said that when employees do not share in the costs of medical care, the system is open to abuse. He said ILWU employers have incurred high costs for services such as chiropractic care for longshoremen.

Adams said he did not appreciate an officer of another union criticizing the ILWU. “We represent the working class. People should have a positive attitude,” Adams said.

The PMA and ILWU were unable to speak at the AgTC conference due to the rapidly-approaching contract deadline, but the ILWU had two members present in the audience, including Adams.

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