



ILWU leader calls for more permanent longshoremen

Union leader says there is a need for more trained longshoremen and a 24-hour port.

By [Chris Dupin](#) | Thursday, October 16, 2014

A leader in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union in Southern California said there is a need for more permanent longshoreman jobs and for around-the-clock operations in order to keep the Port of Long Beach and Port of Los Angeles competitive.

Speaking last night at a panel discussion about the challenges faced by ports in Southern California, Bobby Olvera, Jr., president of ILWU Local 13, said, “Our biggest threat is ourselves — it is the antiquated way we have been doing business in the twin ports. It has been seven years since we hired new workers in the port. There are a thousand people that we have lost and failed to train,” he said, referencing workers who had retired or left the industry.

“We have to get the hiring process back going. For seven years we have languished, without a single person hired from our casual hall. These casuals today are five days a week, and yet we can’t get them into the union and get them trained to operate the machines to move the cargo.”

As an example, he said the union sometimes has trouble filling forklift jobs to move Chilean fruit because it does not sufficient men who have been trained.

He said that there are “over 10,000 casuals, but they are not in, they are not being trained on the equipment to operate it. Unskilled labor is not the way to go. We have to get them trained to operate the equipment, and there has to be an understanding of continuing the hiring process.

“We need to move cargo and not have cargo sit on the docks,” said Olvera, who said that some terminal operators are operating with the same mentality of 10-15 years ago, even though larger ships are now arriving at the port.

He said there are terminals that are not being managed properly, pointing to a lack of chassis, long queues of trucks, and the fact that within terminals, instead of large numbers of containers being shuttled from the container crane to a single location in a terminal, longshoremen sometime spend 15 minutes “hopscoching around a 400-acre facility” looking for a place to find a spot to store a single container.

“The ports are too expensive, and property is too valuable, for the cargo to sit on the docks for days and

days and days.

“We need to be a 24 hour port. We are the biggest port complex,” Olvera said. “What we do here impacts every Congressional district in this country. We need to put people to work, move containers while families are home sleeping, move them down the highways in the middle of the night — that’s the key. If we can’t adjust our thinking and our cooperation between the parties, that is the biggest threat to the ports of the Long Beach and Los Angeles.”

He said that even if there is not need for terminals to be open 24 hours on every day, it should possible as the need arises.

Olvera said he did not know if the desire to have more casual ILWU workers become part of the union’s regular workforce or 24-hour operations are part of the current ILWU contract negotiations with the Pacific Maritime Association.

He also expressed concern about safety of new robotic equipment.

“Automation is not the wave of the future,” he said. “We’re seeing the flaws in automation right now in the Port of Los Angeles. We are seeing machines that run into each other. We are seeing a lack of productivity.”

Responding to a charge that the union is “hard timing” the TraPac terminal over automation, Olvera said there are safety issues related to the terminal’s automated equipment.

When such equipment “can be accessed from half way across the world, and those robots end up running into each other and wind up dropping 500-pound motors within 20 feet of a marine clerk, it presents a big issue. We are seeing introduction of this technology being rushed on the waterfront. I think there was some short sightedness on behalf of TraPac’s management and their board of directors in rushing the technology into service.”

He said the ILWU and TraPac and the City of Los Angeles, through the Mayor’s office, are working on a system assessment with an independent IT firm; he said, “we will employ some firewalls to bring some protection for our workforce.”

Olvera said the technology is not working correctly today, but said he believed at some point it will and when it does so “properly and safely, we will be there to move as much cargo as those machines can provide.”

Speaking about chassis roadability inspections that have frustrated some drayage companies, Olvera said the inspections were started three years ago, were created through an arbitration process, and have reduced the amount of debris such as mudflaps and chassis legs littering highways out of the port. He said recently the union has begun asking truck drivers to get out of their trucks during the inspections because “last week we had a truck driver’s clutch pop while a mechanic was underneath his chassis inspecting the tires, and the chassis lurched forward and the man was almost crushed.”

Money being spent on automation would be better invested in chassis, including a gray fleet, highways, and other infrastructure at ports, in his view.

Olvera made his comments during a panel discussion on the “state of the trade” sponsored by the Center for International Trade and Transportation at the California State University, Long Beach and the METRANS Transportation Center where he appeared with Jon Slangerup, the chief executive of the Port of Long Beach, and Peter Friedmann, a Washington, D.C., attorney who represents the Pacific Coast Council-Customs Brokers and Freight Forwarders Association, and two major shippers groups, the Agriculture Transportation Coalition, and Coalition of New England Companies for Trade.

“Bobby’s absolutely right,” said Slangerup. “Longshoremen get it; they understand it; they work it every day.”

He said, “Port efficiency, port velocity, is a critical thing to remaining competitive. The concern we have is that at the current moment, we are probably three to five days behind our normal flow of goods. That has a ripple effect throughout the entire supply chain that is quite devastating for those who have planned, particularly at this time of year.”

One audience member, Mark Hirzel, president of the Los Angeles Customs Brokers and Freight Forwarders Association, said that delays in the port mean that shippers are incurring demurrage by not

being able to get their cargo in a timely fashion.

“It’s adding additional cost to the supply chain that no one anticipated, and in my humble opinion, it is a drag on our national economy and national prosperity,” Hirzel said.

He said it is taking two weeks sometimes to get containers off terminals, and noted, “Generally, demurrage is charged to try and keep people from using the terminal as a warehouse. Now there are people who want to get their cargo and they can’t — it’s not being used as a warehouse, its being used as a jail, and it is costing them money to for their cargo to be detained.”

Slangerup said the traditional role of the Port of Long Beach “has been to facilitate discussion among the stakeholders and seek improvements in cooperation and systems between the stakeholders.

“To me, that is not enough anymore. The port of Long Beach has taken a very active position, and we are going to address the chassis issue by simply becoming an operating group, at least when it comes to chassis.”

On Monday, the port of Long Beach announced a plan to develop a standby fleet of chassis, and Slangerup vowed that the port would not allow a lack of chassis to affect the port during peak season.

Slangerup said there is a need for cargo systems that track cargo from origin to destination to be integrated. PierPass — a system in the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach that uses a daytime fee to provide an incentive for drivers to pick up cargo at night and uses the fee to fund nighttime operations — has been a success, said Slangerup, but he said there needs to be a “PierPass 2.0 that will look at the integration of systems over the top of that.”

Slangerup said the two ports have a geographic advantage because of their proximity to the growing economies of East Asia, but warned, “if we do not get the system to be extremely efficient and very high velocity from a productivity standpoint, we will start to lose our edge.”

Friedmann said issues surrounding the Port of Los Angeles and the Port of Long Beach are of national importance.

“There are people 1,500 miles east of here who are very upset about PierPass. I believe the current configuration of PierPass is driving cargo away from this complex. It is disastrous for many exporters; it is unfair, ” he said, complaining it is not clear how the money that terminals operators receive through PierPass is spent.

“I would say, on behalf of the exports community, we would love to see public agencies, for example, LA and Long Beach, take it over because at least then it would be transparent,” he said.

Friedmann praised the decision by the Port of Long Beach several years ago to waive demurrage penalties on containers detained for inspection by agencies such as Customs and Border Protection, and called on the Port of Lost Angeles to do the same.

He cautioned the audience, “It would be a mistake, even here where you have the largest, most sophisticated, highest-volume port complex certainly in North America, to believe the cargo is captive to this area.” He noted most of the country’s population is in the East and said six of the country’s seven fastest states are also located in the East.

He also noted that U.S. agriculture and forest exports can be sourced from other parts of the world.

As an example, he pointed to almonds. Japanese candy makers 12 years ago, after U.S. West Coast ports were shut down in a labor dispute, began sourcing their almonds in Turkey, and he said some of the business still has never been retrieved by California almond growers despite the quality of their product.

“Nobody cares if the broccoli was chopped in California or Costa Rica or Chile or Australia, and it is not a brand name,” he said.

He noted manufacturers of garments and other products are increasingly sourcing from South Asia where services using the Suez Canal to the U.S. East Coast are highly competitive, and that five East Coast ports in five years will be able to handle large, deep draft ships.