

LA-LB terminals brace for COVID-related labor shortage

Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor | Jan 04, 2022 3:17PM EST

COVID-19 positivity rates are climbing rapidly among longshore workers and office workers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, and while labor availability has not yet been affected, the head of the employers' association said the worst is yet to come.

"The next two weeks are going to be horrible," Jim McKenna, president of the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), told JOC.com Tuesday. The PMA administers the coastwide contract with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

A half-dozen LA-LB terminal operators said they have yet to feel the full impact of workers testing positive or being forced to quarantine after coming in contact with someone who has, but they anticipate it will soon affect the ability of terminals to fill work gangs. If that happens, ships will take longer to work at berth, which will cause existing vessel congestion to worsen as ships back up at anchor and beyond the anchorage area.

On Sunday, the vessel backup off LA-LB was 101 container ships, including 17 at anchor or loitering within 40 miles of the coast and 84 container ships loitering outside the 40-mile zone or slow-steaming en route to the ports, according to the Marine Exchange of Southern California.

"Multiple people are out because of COVID," said Alan McCorkle, president of Yusen Terminals in Los Angeles. He said both longshore workers and management personnel are testing positive, and Yusen is reinstituting workplace safety precautions that were in effect in 2020 and early 2021. "We went back to full-force protocol," McCorkle said.



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About 150 longshore workers on the West Coast were tested Tuesday and about 100 of those were positive, McKenna said, which would mean a positivity rate of almost 67 percent. About 80 percent of those who tested positive were in Southern California. The problem surfaced about two weeks ago and the positivity rate has been climbing daily since. “It started with two or three cases, and then five, and then 20, and then 40,” McKenna said.

Employers suspect that the daily number of reported cases is greatly understated as many workers have yet to report the results of tests they have taken since the holidays.

The ILWU pledged that its members would continue to work through the virus, but the union will continue to place safety above all else.

“We are doing our best to keep cargo moving at the ports, but health and safety is our highest priority given the severe illness and death we have experienced on the docks,” Frank Ponce De Leon, ILWU coast committeeman, told JOC.com Tuesday.

Some 150 casual — or part-time — jobs in Southern California went unfilled on Tuesday’s first shift, something that hasn’t happened in weeks. McKenna said ILWU foremen last summer and fall had been working six shifts per week on average, with general longshore workers and marine clerks averaging between five and 5.5 shifts per week.

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