

PMA-ILWU Contract: Technology & Automation

Embracing innovation and modernization have been hallmarks of the West Coast waterfront for decades.

Traditionally, maritime employers and workers alike have recognized that harnessing technology enables ports to grow more productive and efficient – benefitting all sides. Shipping is a competitive business, and more productive terminals attract greater cargo volumes, generate more revenue, and create more jobs throughout the supply chain.

Automation plays a critical role in ensuring productive terminals and meeting future supply chain demands while working towards zero-emission operations:

- Automation improves productivity, boosts efficiency, and increases cargo capacity at landlocked marine terminals.
- Southern California maritime employers are investing hundreds of millions of dollars to modernize terminals, enabling significant environmental improvements. For many terminal operators, automation is a crucial factor in meeting zero-emission requirements.
- Automation proved highly valuable during the pandemic-era supply chain crisis. A study co-authored by Dr. Michael Nacht of UC Berkeley found that container throughput at automated terminals at the Ports of LA and Long Beach was 44% higher than at non-automated terminals.
- The study also found that paid ILWU hours increased by more than twice as much at the automated terminals than the non-automated terminals between 2015 and 2021.

Automation in the Contract

The ILWU agreed to allow employers to automate terminals beginning in 2008, in return for substantial benefits in their contract. The right to automate remains part of the contract today. The contract also enables terminal operators to introduce new technologies that promote sustainability and efficiency, and it supports the ILWU workforce with a pay guarantee plan and comprehensive training programs.

The contract provisions are clear and have been upheld by the Coast Arbitrator, a third party waterfront authority jointly appointed by PMA and the ILWU.

Automation Provisions

Section 15 of the Pacific Coast Longshore Contract Document provides clear direction about the rules and guidelines for implementing automated technology. Contract provisions include the following:

- *“There shall be no interference by the Union with the Employers’ right to operate efficiently and to change methods of work to utilize labor-saving devices... efficient utilization and organization of the workforce, introduction of labor-saving devices, or removal of work restrictions.”*
- *“It is recognized that the introduction of new technologies, including fully mechanized and robotic-operated marine terminals, necessarily displaces traditional longshore work and workers, including the operating, maintenance and repair, and associated cleaning of stevedore cargo handling equipment.”*
- *“The parties recognize robotics and other technologies will replace a certain number of equipment operators and other traditional longshore classifications. It is agreed that the jurisdiction of the ILWU shall apply to the maintenance and repair of all present and forthcoming stevedore cargo handling equipment in accordance with Sections 1.7 and 1.71 and shall constitute the functional equivalent of such traditional ILWU work.”*

Guaranteed Pay for Longshore Workers

Registered longshore workers who are unable to obtain full-time work are protected by the contract’s pay guarantee plan (PGP), which provides a guaranteed weekly income to all industry registrants who meet certain eligibility criteria. This includes those whose work opportunities are impacted by the use of technology.