

The Port Strike's Effect on Maritime Commerce

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The strike by port dockworkers (commonly called longshoremen) at East and Gulf Coast ports has raised concerns about the economic impact should the strike last more than a few days. The [International Longshoremen's Association](#) (ILA) and the [U.S. Maritime Alliance, Ltd.](#), the employers representing ocean carriers and port terminal operators, have not been able to renew their six-year labor-management agreement that expired on September 30, 2024. Disagreement over wage increases and port automation [reportedly](#) are the main sticking points.

The ILA represents longshoremen at East and Gulf Coast ports that handle containerized cargo—the loading and unloading of container ships—as well as “car carrier” ships that carry automobiles. The strike will not shut down other port activity, such as the loading/unloading of oil and gas tankers, and dry bulk vessels carrying products like grain and coal in bulk form. The ILA also handles supplies for cruise ships; reportedly, they will continue to work these ships to avoid disrupting the public’s travel plans.

In 2022, East and Gulf Coast seaports accounted for 60% of the import and export containers shipped through U.S. seaports (the West Coast seaports accounted for 40%). This same year, East and Gulf Coast seaports accounted for 15 of the top 20 U.S. container ports ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Top 20 U.S. Container Ports by Shipping Volume (TEUs), 2022

East and Gulf Coast Ports marked with *

Port Name and State	Imports	Exports	Total
Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, NY & NJ*	5,352,134	1,252,065	6,604,199
Port of Los Angeles, CA	5,231,585	1,192,756	6,424,341
Port of Long Beach, CA	4,675,674	1,056,910	5,732,584
Port of Savannah, GA*	3,012,685	1,317,230	4,329,915
Port of Houston Authority of Harris County, TX*	2,034,774	1,216,979	3,251,753
Port of Virginia, VA*	1,809,971	983,373	2,793,344
Port of Charleston, SC*	1,491,989	634,282	2,126,271

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Port Name and State	Imports	Exports	Total
Port of Oakland, CA	1,032,499	655,035	1,687,534
Tacoma, WA	677,679	362,981	1,040,660
Port of Seattle, WA	705,931	207,408	913,339
PortMiami, FL*	578,156	310,807	888,963
Port Everglades, FL*	406,970	351,521	758,490
Baltimore, MD*	521,729	210,044	731,773
Philadelphia Regional Port Authority, PA*	535,820	137,708	673,528
Mobile, AL*	292,962	147,464	440,427
Port of New Orleans, LA*	126,820	224,979	351,799
Jacksonville, FL*	212,193	98,003	310,196
San Juan, PR*	217,324	55,950	273,274
Wilmington, NC*	120,996	116,187	237,183
Wilmington, DE*	187,541	16,850	204,391

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Waterborne Commerce Statistics Center, [Waterborne Container Traffic](#).

Notes: TEU = 20-foot equivalent unit. *East or Gulf Coast port. 2022 is latest year available. These top 20 ports accounted for 81% of the nation's total foreign waterborne container trade.

Containers carry a wide assortment of goods. Retail goods and manufacturing parts tend to comprise a large share of imported containers, and U.S. export containers often consist of intermediate goods and agricultural items. The strike coincides with the start of the harvest season and the peak season for retail goods distribution in anticipation of year-end holiday sales. Common imports of containerized goods are apparel, beverages, household items such as furniture and appliances, and manufactured parts such as electric machinery parts and iron and steel products. On the export side, wood pulp and articles of wood account for a large number of loads, as well as aluminum and articles thereof, and oil seeds and grains.

Some East and Gulf Coast ports are important for certain industries and commodities. For example, 45% of the containers exported from [Houston](#) are loaded with resins or plastics. Raw cotton and poultry exporters are reliant on the Port of Savannah, which is the nation's [largest poultry exporting port](#). Philadelphia and Wilmington (Delaware) are rivals as the leading ports handling imports of [fresh fruit in refrigerated containers](#). East and Gulf Coast ports handle 44% of the nation's waterborne [pork exports](#). Goods requiring refrigeration, such as poultry, pork, and fruit, are sensitive to delay, partly because of the energy required to keep the containers' refrigeration units running. To some extent, shippers of "dry" (non-refrigerated) goods had some capability to stockpile before the strike.

Longshoremen drive new automobiles on and off car carriers (i.e., ships that have ramps and resemble car garages in their interiors). When the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed in Baltimore in March 2024, closing the nation's largest port for the import and export of automobiles, automakers turned to other ports on the East Coast that handle cars: Brunswick (Georgia), Charleston, and New York/New Jersey. These ports will also be closed during the strike.

China is often the leading origin or destination for containerized goods at East and Gulf Coast seaports. Ships trading between these ports and China sail through the Panama Canal, which is slower but less costly than moving the goods by railroad across the United States to/from West Coast ports (referred to as the "landbridge" route). Importers and exporters in the eastern United States could turn to the landbridge route, but doing so could be cost prohibitive for lower value-to-weight-ratio cargoes. This ratio is also the obstacle for most waterborne freight using airplanes because air cargo is economical only for the highest

value-to-weight-ratio products, such as medical instruments. Aviation is also not economical for the quantity of goods transported in ocean containers. The Port of Montreal, Canada, is an economic alternative for U.S. Northeast and northern Midwest shippers, but there is also ongoing labor strife at that port. Texas shippers might examine rail connections to [Mexican ports](#).

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