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## L.A. and Long Beach ports are loading up on jobs

**Retail orders increase the number of dockworkers at the facilities 34.5% during the first three weeks of February.**

By Ronald D. White

February 22, 2010

The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are bringing in a surprising new commodity: jobs.

The first post-recession surge in employment at the nation's busiest seaport complex began this month and appears to be gathering momentum. There has been as much as a threefold increase in the number of longshoremen finding work on the docks in the first three weeks of February compared with the same period last year, a review of daily employment dispatches shows.

Through the first three weeks there was an average of 2,679 longshore jobs a day during the usual three work shifts at the two ports, according to the summaries.

That's an increase of 34.5% over the 1,992 jobs that were available on average a year earlier.

The increase in dock work this month indicated that retailers were ordering goods again, even if it was just to refill depleted warehouses, said John Husing, an economist who tracks trade-related employment in the Inland Empire.

"Companies are restocking their inventories," Husing said, "and the weak dollar is helping our exports."

A strong recovery in international trade is vital to the regional economy, experts say. About 116,000 Southern Californians work in jobs related to goods movement. An additional 185,000 are employed in warehousing and wholesale distribution of various imports and exports, said Jack Kyser, an economist with the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. Longshore jobs are among the highest paying blue-collar jobs in the nation, with wages of \$22 to \$35 an hour.

But the depth of the recession has tempered the enthusiasm of many involved in cargo movement. Most of the skepticism can be laid to one of the worst crashes in employment in the waterfront's history.

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George Lujan, for instance, said he needed to see sustained employment improvement before he would believe that a strong recovery had arrived. Lujan is president of Local 13, in Long Beach, of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the union that represents all West Coast dockworkers.

"It's picked up. It's a positive sign, but we have no knowledge of what the future holds," Lujan said.

Jim McKenna, president of the Pacific Maritime Assn., which represents ocean shipping lines and terminal operators in their labor negotiations with the ILWU, said that some customers were shipping ahead of schedule "before rate increases take effect. For the calendar year, I think a 3% to 7% gain is possible."

Others loosened the reins on their enthusiasm.

"It's wonderful news," Kyser said. "International trade is the industry that will lead the economic recovery."

But the ports still have a long way to go before they begin to rival the number of jobs available during the economic boom years that ran from 2004 through most of 2008.

In February 2006, an average of 3,773 jobs a day were filled by longshoremen, and that number increased to nearly 4,000 jobs a day in February 2007. During those two years, the ports sometimes employed more than 5,200 dockworkers a day. During the depth of the recession last year, that number dropped to as low as 1,000 jobs a day.

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