



21 May 2010

Briefing Note

Errors and omissions: a report on Canada's ports by Michael C. Ircha

Professor Ircha's report on Canada's ports may contain some truth and insight but these are hidden by serious errors of fact and sweeping generalizations.

In spite of this, the report seems to have been endorsed by the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association which is promoting it among policy makers in Ottawa.

Perhaps most serious is the Professor's sweeping and prejudicial statement in which he characterizes the entire Indo-Canadian west coast longshore workforce as being unable to speak English properly. According to the Professor:

"The problem for trainers is that although the Indo-Canadian workers' written skills are good, their English verbal abilities are poor."

Citing that Indo-Canadians make up 40 – 45% of the workforce, Professor Ircha characterizes this generalization as one of the key factors preventing Canada's ports from increasing productivity and competitive advantage! The fact is Indo-Canadians make up approximately 12% of the workforce. Rather than being a liability as the Professor suggests, most are highly productive and well regarded by their fellow workers.

24/7 operations

Professor Ircha's paper contains several other errors in fact. For example, the professor states that North American ports, including those in BC, do not operate year round, seven days a week and 24 hours a day. **In fact, all ports in BC have operated 24/7 since 1969.**

Unfamiliar with the longshore

His paper betrays an unfamiliarity with longshore workplaces on the west coast. For example, he writes that:

- All longshoremen at Port Metro Vancouver are rotated on a three-month cycle.

In fact, only deepsea gang members who represent a small percentage of the overall workforce (20 people out of a workforce of 3000), are rotated on this cycle. Source: Black Book document # 84 clause n) page 232 "may" be rotated every 4 months.

- Unions no longer run dispatch systems.

In fact, in all of North America only Vancouver and Montreal dispatch is run by the employer.

- Most North American ports do not use dedicated employees.

In fact, they do, including the Port Metro Vancouver. Source: ILWU/BCMEA Collective Agreement Article 21.03 (1)

Training

The author makes a number of statements concerning longshore training that simply have no basis in fact. For example, the professor states:

- The BCMEA offers a 47 day training course to new entrants.

In fact, this extensive program is available to workers only after 5 years employment.

- That having union members train other workers is like "the partially blind leading the blind".

In fact, ILWU trainers are widely recognized for their expertise, knowledge and ability and have been recruited to deliver training around the world.

Education

Professor Ircha makes several disparaging and inaccurate statements concerning educational levels among the longshore workforce. For example, he states that:

- 30% of BC longshoremen failed to achieve a grade 8 literacy level.

*It is true that 30% of the applicants during the last round of hiring failed to achieve a grade 8 level, **but these applicants were not hired.***

- Computer illiteracy among workers is a significant barrier to improving productivity.

In fact, longshore workers in BC operate some of the most sophisticated technology in the Americas.

No strike or lock out for more than 11 years

The author writes about labour relations disputes and lengthy strikes when in fact there has not been a longshore labour dispute on the west coast for more than 11 years.

Only 4 responded to the survey

The professor's paper is based on a survey of industry management. The factual errors that litter the document are not surprising given that only four people on the entire Canadian pacific coast responded to the survey.

In spite of this, the Professor's view that direct relationship between terminal operator employers and their union should be established, has merit. At the Westshore and Ridley terminals, where the BCMEA is not involved, relations have never been better between the management and the ILWU.

--end--

For more information: Tom Dufresne 604-254-8141