

CQ tug workers take industrial action over safety issues



Generic views of Gladstone city with the port , coal loading facility ,harbour , and with Curtis Island behind . Gladstone QLD

Lachlan Berlin

The marine engineer's union has taken industrial action against a towage company over safety concerns arising from new procedures in its Gladstone operations.

Engineers from Smit Lamnalco Towage held a six hour stoppage of operations between 7am and 1pm on June 1.

Led by the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE), the stoppage was held in six consecutive one-hour periods.

This comes after a previous notice of protected action was withdrawn last month and AIMPE tried to negotiate with Smit Lamnalco late into the evening on May 31.

Enterprise agreement renewal negotiations began between both parties in July 2020.

According to Smit Lamnalco, there have been 19 days of negotiations over the past 10 months to no avail.

The company says little progress has been made with the negotiations over the past months.

AIMPE federal president Martin Byrne said the removal of tug engineers from supervising mechanical maintenance has been associated with mechanical breakdowns of the tugs.

“The central catalyst for the members taking protected industrial action has been the push by the company to exclude the tug engineers from the important maintenance function and to have tug maintenance carried out by shore personnel without the supervision of the tug engineers,” he said.

“AIMPE members have been frustrated by the changes being implemented by the company and see that the protected action is their only way to demonstrate their concerns.”

Smit Lamnalco is also proposing to remove or reduce existing agreement entitlements such as not maintaining essential safety qualifications for specialised operations, according to Mr Byrne.

“Shipping has increased in Gladstone and not decreased,” he said.

“It is about the safe operation of the tugs which requires direct supervision of mechanical repairs by the tug engineers responsible for the operation of the tugs.”

AIMPE met with Smit Lamnalco in a conference chaired by Fair Work Commission deputy president Ingrid Asbury on June 2, to continue enterprise agreement negotiations for Gladstone’s tug engineers.

Although Mr Byrne said while negotiations at this conference have progressed, there may be a hiccup in the June 4 discussions.

“There has been a problem today where the engineers’ delegate has not been relieved to attend today’s discussions,” he said.

“AIMPE is trying to find a relief so that talks can resume.”

The union has now given notice for another eight-hour stoppage on June 8.

Mr Byrne said AIMPE told the Gladstone Ports Corporation tugs would still be available and engineers would remain on-board in case of any emergency.

“Gladstone is an essential link in the global supply chain for minerals and energy exports,” Mr Byrne said.

The union said the dispute was not about money.

Smit Lamnalco relations manager Jared Laughlin said there were about 50 items presented in AIMPE’s original log of claims.

“I would be surprised if we have reached agreement on a handful, despite almost 12 months of talking,” Mr Laughlin said.

“AIMPE took the highly unusual step of filing for Protected Action Ballot Orders (PABO) late on Christmas Eve 2020, even though there was a substantive pay-rise offer on the table that had not been responded to, and before the current EA had even expired.”

Smit Lamnalco managing director David Fethers slammed AIMPE for ‘taking counsel from individuals who may not have their best interest at heart’.

“It isn’t lost on me that this is the same union and same union official who presided over the loss of 52 of their members’ jobs in Port Hedland in 2014,” Mr Fethers said.

Two tugs collided while towing in 2017 and the company then made some changes to the maintenance strategy as well as giving extra resources to a shore based maintenance team.

The company claims these ‘improvements’ were to modernise and streamline the maintenance strategy.

“AMSA and MSQ, quite rightly at the time, issued the company with improvement and deficiency notices following the collision incident,” Mr Fethers said.

“It is quite ridiculous of AIMPE to now be suggesting that we return to that way of working.

“We simply will not compromise on the safety of our operations, in order to satisfy the empire building desires of a particular union.”

Gladstone general manager Peter Sedgwick thinks it’s unnecessary for industrial action when the parties are meeting with each other through Fair Work to sort out an agreement.

“We are all working towards a common goal to ensure long term, secure employment while maintaining safe and efficient operations in the Port of Gladstone,” he said.

“It would be better if AIMPE focus on that rather than continue to take unnecessary action.”

The company employs more than 100 tug engineers in Gladstone.

https://dpe.gladstoneobserver.com.au/infinity/article_popover_share.aspx?guid=e6dd6a62-f015-4792-932b-16948feff75a