

The DCN

Gladstone tug engineers down tools

Posted by [Ian Ackerman](#) | 1st June, 2021



File photograph of Smit Lamnalco tugs; Image: Smit Lamnalco

TUGBOAT engineers employed by Smit Lamnalco at the Port of Gladstone took protected industrial action on Tuesday (1 June).

Members of the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers stopped work on Tuesday for six consecutive one-hour periods from 0700 to 1300.

Negotiations for the renewal of the enterprise agreement between AIMPE members working at Gladstone and Smit Lamnalco began in July last year.

The towage company said it lodged an application with the Fair Work Commission in December seeking assistance in conciliating the bargaining.

Smit Lamnalco regional industrial relations manager Jared Laughlin said, “Of the roughly 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”.

Seeking resolution

AIMPE federal president Martin Byrne told *DCN* that the union had been trying to settle the key issues proactively and it is still keen to seek a resolution.

“This follows protracted enterprise agreement negotiations,” he said.

“The application for the protected industrial action ballot was approved by Fair Work Commission earlier this year, we sought an extension of the period in which to take the protected industrial action in order to allow more time for negotiations.

“And even as late as last night we presented the company the official involved in the negotiations, a proposal which would have enabled the action today to have been withdrawn,” Mr Byrne said.

“That was not accepted, although I do concede that it was provided to the company outside of ordinary business hours.”

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The advertisement is a horizontal banner. On the left, there is a logo for Southern Ports with the text 'SOUTHERN PORTS' and 'ALBANY BIRRIET ESPERANCE' below it. To the right of the logo, the text 'PORT OF ALBANY' is displayed in large blue letters, followed by 'Expressions of Interest for the Use of the Port for the Purposes of Trade' in smaller black text. Further right, a blue button contains the text 'CLICK FOR MORE INFORMATION'. Below this banner is a photograph of a red and white container ship at sea. On the left side of the ship, a red box contains the text 'One thing you can rely on: We're by your side.' On the right side of the ship, a red box contains the 'HAMBURG SÜD' logo and the text 'A Maersk Company'.

Maintenance arrangements

Mr Byrne said the dispute is not about pay increases. He said tug engineers should maintain the key and essential role of carrying out the maintenance program on the vessels.

“Our concerns are with the maintenance function of engineers in the tugboat industry we want to maintain both their competency to carry out their maintenance, including training and revalidation. We believe they should be supported by the company,” Mr Byrne said.

“We’re very strongly of the view that the person in charge of the tug machinery must have an integral role in the maintenance of the vessel’s machinery,” Mr Byrne said.

“We are concerned that this trend away from that position has led to a greater instance of mechanical breakdowns of vessels. We want to avoid that trend worsening, and we want to ensure the greatest possible reliability of tugs, which we believe is delivered by the tug engineer retaining control and supervision of all shore-based personnel who assist with mechanical maintenance onboard.”

Collision in 2017

In 2017, following an incident where two tugs collided while conducting towage in the port, Smit Lamnalco conducted a study into maintenance management and practices.

The company said it made changes to modernise and streamline its maintenance strategy, as well as the addition of extra resources in the form of a shore-based maintenance team.

Smit Lamnalco managing director David Fethers said the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and Maritime Safety Queensland rightly issued the company with improvement and deficiency notes following the collision incident.

“It is quite ridiculous of AIMPE to now be suggesting that we return to that way of working”, Mr Fethers said.

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

Smit Lamnalco said it provides employment for more than 100 tug crew within the Gladstone operation.

Smit Lamnalco Gladstone general manager Peter Sedgwick said it is unnecessary to take industrial action when the parties are meeting with each other and using the Fair Work Commission to get to a final 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,” Mr Sedgwick said.

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

Smit Lamnalco managing director David Fethers said, “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. We have a good team of engineers in Gladstone, and it is unfortunate that they are taking counsel from individuals who may not have their best interest at heart.”