

Dockers say talks may head off new casual labour strike



PHOTOS: SHARON MARRIS

STRIKERS: Hitting the streets outside the Bledisloe Terminal last weekend.

by Sharon Marris

The seven-day strike threatened by Auckland dock workers could be off.

Maritime union spokesman Victor Billot says negotiations with Ports of Auckland have been making "reasonably good progress" and he expects a resolution early next week.

The dispute is over casual labour.

Billot says the proposed strike was the latest move in an "ongoing campaign" by union members who want a pathway for workers to progress from casual to permanent employment.

"Casualisation has been affecting our industry since the late 1980s and is getting worse," he says.

"A lot of our members are

really feeling the crunch."

After last week's four-day strike, union negotiators were given backing by their 3000 members to call a seven-day strike if the negotiators were unhappy with talks which began on Monday.

Port spokesperson Bronwen Jones says only 10% of maritime workers are casuals and the collective employment agreement allows for 25%.

Billot says these figures are based on the entire workforce and include workers in administration, not just the watersiders his union represents.

"Casual work means there is no security of pay and shift workers sometimes get very little warning when work comes up.

"It really stuffs up your fami-

ly life," he says.

"It affects other workforces as well and they can't always do anything about it."

Mike Treen, organiser for UNITE union for low pay and casual workers, says the strikers want more permanent port workers.

One of the union's main aims is to integrate casual workers into permanent employment.

Billot says Port Chalmers has a deal with Port Otago where younger casuals enter a grading system which results in permanent employment.

"Advanced jobs are only done by permanents and this gives the company an incentive to train younger workers."

On its website, Ports of Auckland says solutions should be found around the mediation

table rather than through strikes.

"In the old days wharfies were regarded as striking at the drop of a hat, but the maritime union has always been at the sharp end of workers' problems and prepared to stand up for what's right," says Billot.

The previous agreement between the port and the union expired on January 31.

Before last week's strike, the two sides had been in mediation for five weeks.

On September 7, officials offered workers a wage rise of 2.5%.

In response, the union presented the company with a list of requests that would cost almost \$2 million a year.

Last Friday morning about 25 watersiders held placards on

Tinley Street at the entrance to the Bledisloe Terminal, encouraging passing motorists to "toot support".

The group was loud but there was no violence and only a passing police presence.

Just under half of the port's 540 workers were involved in the strike.

Four ship calls were lost – two diverting to Wellington, one to Tauranga and another bypassing New Zealand completely. POA says this resulted in the loss of about 3500 containers.

Billot admits the union is small in numbers but says it is quite powerful.

"Most goods arriving in the country come through this port."

The port handles around two-thirds of New Zealand's imports and one-third of its exports.



CASUAL WORKERS: Seeking more security.



TAKING PART: Stevedore Wayne Risetto.