

# Los Angeles Times

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From the Los Angeles Times

LABOR

## Port 'casuals' have sinking feeling amid cargo woes

Jobs are scarce for the last-in-line nonunion dockworkers. Nearby communities also feel their pain.

By Louis Sahagun

July 20, 2009

At a hiring hall in the seaside community of Wilmington, a handful of job hopefuls reminisced about boom times, when the place was mobbed night and day by nonunion dockworkers seeking employment and vendors selling tacos and work gloves.

That was 2004 through 2007, when the Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex was enjoying record-breaking gains in shipping that generated an abundance of work for "casual workers" designated to take jobs unfilled by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

Now, facing the steepest declines in maritime trade on record, work on the waterfront has dwindled, leaving casual workers including Robert Denson, 55, "just a few steps away from the poorhouse," he said.

"I come here every day, hoping for something," he said, shaking his head. "The last time I worked was one day in May. They say, 'Hold on, things will improve.' But they don't."

A few yards away, Phyllis Wade, 40, sat in her car, also waiting for a chance to work. "Just a few years ago, things were booming around here," she said. "Now the place feels like a 747 that lost its wings at 30,000 feet."

Wilmington and neighboring San Pedro, both tightknit, ethnically diverse communities strongly associated with dockworkers and their culture, have been hit hard by the downturn in U.S.-bound cargo.

"When movement of cargo slows down, it hurts everybody," said Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, whose district includes the Port of Los Angeles. "Dockworkers make good money and they tend to spend it in the local economy. If they aren't working, a lot of people suffer because they're less likely to fix their cars, change their tires or go to a restaurant."

"My son is a casual," Hahn added. "He got work on Saturday. His last dock job before that was in November."

Experienced longshore workers earn about \$31.68 an hour. Less-experienced workers including casuals earn roughly 28% less -- still more than double the state minimum wage.

Over at Eat at Rudy's cafe in Wilmington, a few blocks away from the casuals' open-air hiring hall, business has dropped about 20% since April. The cafe has reduced prices on many items, and its nine employees have started contributing to an in-house "hardship fund," a few hundred dollars given to a different employee at the end of each month.

"We started the fund in April," said cafe waitress Arlene Rose Hernandez, 40, who also is a casual dockworker. "The first person to get the fund was a busboy with nine children."

Hernandez figures her turn for the fund will come around December. In the meantime, she said, "many of our customers are dockworkers. To save a few bucks, some are ordering a glass of milk instead of steak and eggs, and I've lost 20% of my tips."

Even some senior union members, who still enjoy some of the best-paying blue-collar jobs in the nation, are relying on financial benefits drawn from a trust fund to make ends meet.

Under terms of the union contract with shippers and stevedore companies, roughly 6,000 members categorized as Class A get first crack at the best jobs and overtime. Next in line are about 1,700 Class B workers. Remaining jobs go to the roughly 9,700 casuals, who hope to join the union when there is an opening.

But pickings are slim even for Class A workers, who are just trying to get a week's worth of work. Class B members are left with about four to five days of work a month, on average.

"I get calls three times a day from union members saying: 'Please. I'm on the verge of losing my home. Is there a job out there for me?' " said Chris Viramontes, 42, secretary-treasurer of union Local 13. "There's nothing I can say. The latest economic forecasts suggest things won't change for the better until late 2010 or early 2011."

On a recent weekday, there were 300 jobs available at the port complex and 658 Class B workers hoping to land one.

Among those inside a cavernous union dispatch center was Micki Kirkland, who only a few years ago was getting all the work she could handle as a truck driver and equipment operator.

"Right now I'm looking at a \$40,000 loss of income this year," she said.

"I'm cutting corners," added Kirkland, who bought a three-bedroom town house in 2007. "Over the past two years, I've gone from taking a cross-country vacation to praying for good weather so I can vacation on the backyard patio."

Casuals wish more union members would take a day off and free up a job.

"The few jobs trickling down to casuals are a measure of the health of the nation's economy," said Tony Pomella, a union dispatcher at the casuals' hiring hall. "But the situation is also impacting the area's historic waterfront labor culture because ascending generations of dockworkers now may have to look elsewhere for work and careers."

In any other July, Pomella said, the casuals' hiring hall parking lot would have been crowded with men and women jostling for a chance to move containers laden with imported Christmas inventory including toys, clothing, DVD players, kitchenware, tools, televisions and automobiles.

"A few years ago, I dispatched 1,800 jobs in a single shift," Pomella recalled. On Tuesday morning, however, the place was, as one casual described it, "a ghost town."

After two hours of waiting, Wade decided to call it quits.

"I'm out of here," she said. "Nobody's hiring."

It was 9 a.m. Wade drove down the block and turned left, merging into rush-hour traffic on bustling Anaheim Street.

[louis.sahagun@latimes.com](mailto:louis.sahagun@latimes.com)

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