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THE Maritime Union of Australia will proceed with a 48-hour strike in the offshore oil and gas sector today, promoting fresh criticism of Labor's workplace laws by employers.

Unionists employed by Farstad Shipping (Indian Pacific) will strike for 48 hours in support of their claim for significant increases in allowances and wages, after talks yesterday failed to resolve the dispute.

The strike, estimated to cost \$1.5 million, will affect 17 vessels.

Three ships, including two working on the Montara oil spill, have been exempted.

The union won the right to take legal industrial action in support of its claim for a 30 per cent pay rise as well as an increase in construction allowances that employers estimate will cost up to \$3500 weekly per worker.

The Australian Mines and Metals Association said the union's approach could have "dire consequences" for the industry's recovery.

AMMA chief executive Steve Knott said: "Given the outlandish nature of the claim put by the MUA, the ease with which they were able to be issued secret ballot orders to pave the way for protected action shows a significant flaw in existing industrial-relations laws.

"It would appear that, under the Fair Work Act, a union can take protected industrial action no matter how outlandish or frivolous their claim."

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin accused Mr Knott of "grandstanding", saying employers knew the strike was proceeding as a last resort after 12 months of negotiations.

"The AMMA has created the impression that a construction allowance — that would provide parity for maritime workers with riggers — will bring the industry to its knees but they are omitting the facts," Mr Crumlin said.

"The allowance would apply to 0.8 per cent of the offshore operations of Farstad, and would only apply to about 2 per cent of all offshore employers of seafarers.

"On construction projects, which operate 365 days a year, the standard working day is 12 to 15 hours and the weekly hours are on average around 84. So, in fact, the seafarers are working the equivalent of two weeks every week."

The Australian Shipowners Association said it was concerned about the flow-on implications of the union claim.

ASA executive director Teresa Hatch said: "The effect of the excessive wage increase to a group of seafarers will be felt right through the shipping industry. The pool of people trained in this kind of work is not inexhaustible and the force of the labour market will see the most highly paid jobs filled and the other employers having to lift salaries in an attempt to keep their staff."

EWIN HANNAN



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But MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin accused Mr Knott of "grandstanding".

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