

Pay offer of 29pc fails to avert strike

The action threatens the offshore oil and gas sector with massive losses

EWIN HANNAN

THE Maritime Union of Australia will take fresh strike action in the offshore oil and gas sector this week, after rejecting an offer of a 29 per cent pay rise over three years.

Mining employers yesterday attacked the union after confirming that the company, Total Marine Services, would be hit with a 48-hour strike from Friday.

In addition to a 30 per cent pay rise over three years, the MUA is seeking a daily construction allowance. The union wants sea-

farers engaged in offshore construction to earn the same as riggers.

Employers said the union had originally sought a \$500-a-day allowance but, after lengthy negotiations, the union was prepared to accept \$200 a day.

The Australian Mines and Metals Association said Total Marine Services had offered a 29 per cent pay rise and agreed to an allowance of \$175 a day. However, the AMMA's chief executive, Steve Knott, said the offer had been rejected.

Mr Knott said the strike activity was costing the oil and gas sector millions of dollars a day. He said the union was pursuing over-the-top claims despite "generous employer pay and allowance increases of between 25 to 30 per cent".

The "senseless strike activity" was extremely disappointing

given Kevin Rudd's recent calls for improved productivity across all Australian workplaces.

"And not once have we heard the leadership of the MUA put forward how their over-the-top pay and allowance increases will result in any productivity improvements within the sector," Mr Knott said.

A spokeswoman for Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard yesterday reiterated that the government wanted both parties to sit down and resolve their differences.

"Under the Fair Work Act, there are a number of steps either party can take to help facilitate an outcome, including seeking the assistance of Fair Work Australia to mediate or to make recommendations to resolve the dispute," the spokeswoman said.

The MUA claims the allowance applies to about 400 sea-

farers when they are engaged in construction work that might only be for several weeks or months, not all year round.

It says the 30 per cent wage claim averages out at about 7 to 8 per cent a year over the life of the agreement, which expired 10 months ago.

The union says the AMMA is seeking government support for arbitration of the dispute, but it has always opposed arbitration in the reformed industrial relations system.

Mr Knott said the MUA should explain to the public and the Prime Minister exactly which productivity benefits they would be delivering to the sector in order to justify pay rises in excess of \$50,000 for cooks and stewards already earning double the national average wage.