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Shipowners try to scupper strike threat

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SHIPPING companies facing a series of strikes over claims for massive wage and allowance increases have sought the intervention of the government's industrial relations umpire to try to avoid the action.

Farstad Shipping lodged an urgent application with Fair Work Australia yesterday for conciliation with the Maritime Union of Australia over its planned 48-hour strike on Tuesday, which is expected to affect at least 17 vessels servicing oil and gas rigs on the Northwest Shelf, the Timor Sea and Bass Strait.

The dispute is believed to be set down for a hearing as early as Monday in Sydney or Melbourne. A Fair Work Australia tribunal member can make "strong recommendations" to the parties about how the situation could be resolved.

The union told *The Weekend Australian* last night it would consider over the weekend whether it would agree to the Fair Work Australia conciliation.

"I am having a telephone hook-up with my officials on Saturday and we are giving consideration to meeting with Farstad on Monday," MUA assistant national secretary Mick Doleman said.

In addition to a 30 per cent pay rise over the next three years, the union is seeking a construction allowance that employers claim will cost up to \$3500 a week per worker.

It wants seafarers engaged in offshore construction to earn the same as riggers.

Groups representing the resources and shipowners industries have condemned the wage claims as "outrageous" and say any strike action could hamper the economic recovery of the sector.

But the union claims their reaction is "hysterical". It insists the allowance claim was not \$500 a day, more like \$200 to \$300.

Fair Work Australia sanc-

tioned strike action when it ruled the union demands were not fanciful.

Australian Mines and Metals Association workplace policy director Geoff Bull said the union was downplaying its wage claims.

"This is an opportunity for the MUA to show Australians they are prepared to take a reasonable approach to wage negotiations, rather than taking senseless and damaging strike action which could undermine the sector's recovery," he said.

The Australian Shipowners Association said any strike action would be costly and the wage claim by the union was ridiculously high.

"We're not talking pocket change, we're talking about an annual allowance of over \$90,000 per person, and that is on top of a wage offer of 30 per cent over three years," ASA executive director Thereasa Hatch said.

"The threatened strike action will cost the industry millions of dollars a day and that kind of hit doesn't come without a flow-on effect to the economy."

Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard again yesterday urged the parties to "to work together to resolve this matter as quickly as possible".

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin said the AMMA should remember that FWA gave the go-ahead for the strike.

"We remain committed to a negotiated outcome," he said. "Any industrial action is always a last resort and taken only after serious consideration."



Union threat to maroon ship owners

KIM MACDONALD

The peak mining body claims a dozen shipping companies have been threatened with strikes as the maritime union vows to press ahead with a two-day stoppage regardless of a last-minute bid to stop it.

The Australian Mines and Metals Association said the union was negotiating new pay deals with 12 shipping companies and had warned each that its members were prepared to strike.

The union is seeking a 30 per cent pay rise over three years for all members and an extra daily construction allowance of \$400 for a few.

Hundreds of workers on 17 of the 20 vessels owned by Farstad Shipping in the North-West and on the east coast will hold a 48-hour stoppage from midnight tonight.

AMMA spokesman Geoff Bull said it had sought help from the national workplace relations tribunal Fair Work Australia in the hope it would recommend seafarers abandon their industrial action.

Mr Bull was concerned at the prospect of simultaneous strikes at multiple companies which could "cripple the whole industry".

The union is negotiating separate

agreements with each company because pattern bargaining is illegal but concedes each claim is similar.

Maritime Union of Australia secretary Chris Cain confirmed it told shipping companies its members were prepared to strike.

"Obviously we are negotiating in good faith and (strike action) is a last resort," Mr Cain said.

He said the plans for Farstad Shipping had strong support, with 95 per cent of its workers supporting the two-day stoppage in a secret ballot.

The union was determined to push ahead with the action after a year of failed negotiations with Farstad.

Mr Cain said the union had sought legal advice and after discovering that Fair Work Australia could not make a binding order, had decided it would not listen to any recommendations.

He said the \$400 daily construction allowance would apply to only 2 per cent of seafarers and would give them pay parity with riggers who did similar work.

He said most of his members earned \$84,000 a year, including all allowances, and their annual average working week was 42 hours.

AMMA claims the workers earn six-figure annual salaries.