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ILWU, PMA reach agreement on contract

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The tentative contract reached late Monday by negotiators for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Pacific Maritime Association promises six years of peace and stability at West Coast ports, beginning immediately.

Upon announcement of the proposed agreement, the ILWU confirmed that it has agreed to extend the previous contract, which expired on July 1, until the general membership votes on the new agreement. This will resurrect the contract's no-strike clause and should prevent work slowdowns, which employers said hurt productivity during negotiations.

Longshoremen, who had been engaging in a strategy of coordinated and extended coffee breaks the past three weeks, were expected Tuesday to return to the standard procedure of staggering their

breaks in order to keep cargo flowing smoothly.

"They will be taking coffee breaks, but they may not be taking them together," said ILWU spokesman Craig Merrilees.

Spokesmen for the PMA and the union are withholding details of the tentative contract until employer and union leaders present a copy of the agreement to their respective members.

In a process expected to extend into late August, the ILWU will hold a caucus in San Francisco the week of Aug. 18. If the 100-member caucus approves the tentative contract, a vote by the entire union membership will be scheduled.

"We respect the rank and file tradition. The members have the first, last and final say," Merrilees said.

Management has a more streamlined approach to approving the contract. Board members have been

kept informed of progress throughout the negotiations and approval could come by phone, said PMA spokesman Kevin Elliott.

In a brief announcement late Monday, ILWU President Bob McEllrath and PMA President Jim McKenna said the proposed agreement meets the needs of the workers and industry and keeps West Coast ports competitive.

The proposed contract is not expected to include any surprises. It will most likely call for wage increases, maintenance of the union's generous benefits package and some measures to improve productivity.

Until the previous contract was negotiated in 2002, the West Coast had mostly three-year contracts. The tentative contract announced Monday will be for six years.

"This will return port operations to being productive and efficient. It certainly will provide more stability," Elliott said.