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Port closures putting Kern growers on edge

Lockout of about 10,500 dock workers over labor dispute could cost local exporters big bucks.

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Kern's almond harvest is over.

The nuts are processed, packed and ready for shipping.

The only problem is, they've got no place to go.

Ships scheduled to transport Kern's almonds and other commodities to international destinations sit idle at all 29 West Coast ports as the labor dispute between shipping lines and longshoremen rages on.

The Pacific Maritime Association, which represents shipping companies and terminal operators, ordered the lockout of about 10,500 dock workers until the longshoremen's union

agrees to extend their lapsed contract.

How long the lockout will last is anyone's guess, but some Kern County exporters and business owners say they'll take a hard economic hit if the port closures last longer than two or three weeks.

"They've essentially shut down our exports to New Zealand, the Pacific rim countries, any place by boat," said Matthew Peet, supervising biologist with the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. "This is the peak shipping season for a lot of our growers, but nothing is leaving the docks."

Rumblings of a possible labor dispute were picked up in recent weeks by Kern growers and business owners who hustled to get their shipments out before the ports closed. Dennis Atkinson, vice president of agriculture at Tejon Ranch, said harvest crews worked around the clock to bring in their almonds.

"We've met most of our early shipments,

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PORTS: Many business owners believe lockout will be settled within two weeks

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but we were actually hustling to get the premiums for early delivery," he said. "We're continuing to process the product, though, so when the lockout is over, all we have to do is load the containers and get 'em out."

Tejon Ranch will run out of storage space within two weeks or so, but Atkinson is betting the lockout will be over long before space is an issue.

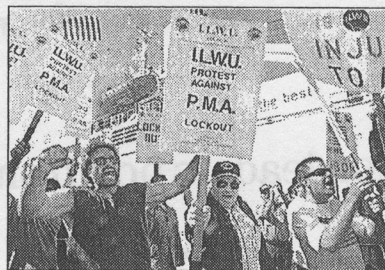
He isn't the only one.

The cotton cooperative Calcot Ltd. was forced to lay off 15 employees Tuesday when the port closures left them with nothing to do. Communications director Mark Bagby said they will be rehired when the dispute ends and the lockout is over.

"With ginning just getting under way, there was no inbound from gins," Bagby said. "We couldn't fill shipments, so there was nothing going out. We couldn't have them just sitting around."

The transportation industry is feeling the pinch, too. Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway officials announced Sunday they would no longer accept international export freight containers destined for the West Coast.

Efren Gutierrez, owner of Highlander Trucking Co. in Bakersfield, said the lockouts could cost him thousands in lost revenue. His trucking company generally transports pro-



JEAN-MARC BOUJU / AP

International Longshore and Warehouse Union workers shout and protest in front of the banana ship Alicante Carrier, in Port Hueneme, 60 miles west of Los Angeles, Wednesday.

duce from Kern County to Fresno and Los Angeles markets in the summer and fall, but during winter months trucks import produce inland from the coastal ports.

"This time of year doesn't affect us too bad, but if it goes into December, it will hurt us," Gutierrez said. "That's when we have a lot of business hauling the produce imported in."

Despite potential losses, local exporters say they're not ready to push the panic button just yet. Atkinson said he and others are confident the lockout will end soon.

"My gut tells me it won't last long," he said. "It's so big it affects everybody, so there will be more pressure to end it."