

Strikes to hit economy for \$40m

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The nationwide shutdown of Patrick stevedore's port terminals over the past 24 hours threatens to cost Australia's economy more than \$40 million, with another hit to the national output expected from more strikes later this month.

The Maritime Union of Australia-led shutdown of ports at Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Fremantle, spurred by a stalemate over a new enterprise bargaining agreement for Patrick's workforce, disrupted the container business at one of the busiest periods for national imports before Chinese New Year.

As Employment Minister Michaelia Cash warned the union's action could harm Australia's international reputation, research by Deloitte Access Economics showed the total disruption at Patrick's four port terminals cost the company \$235m a month, or \$7m a day.

Senior Patrick executive Alexandra Badenoch said yesterday the figures, modelled when the company was last on the brink of an industrial dispute in 2012, "held true" this year.

The research by professor Ian Harper also projected a hit to gross domestic product of \$1.1 billion a month, or \$40m a day, from shutdowns at Patrick terminals in Melbourne and Sydney alone.

Ms Badenoch said it was a busy time for the company, with a burst of container activity "before the lull over Chinese New Year next month".

Port owners peak body Ports Australia chief executive David Anderson said the MUA strikes were "destructive to the national economy" and "illustrates a selfcentred lack of concern about Australian jobs and industries". The MUA, which says it is concerned for wharfies' job security ahead of a possible sale by Patrick owner Asciano, has logged its intention to shut down Patrick's Port Botany terminal for another two 24-hour spells. Senator Cash yesterday admonished the MUA for acting contrary to the "national interest" and suggested its claims were "unrealistic" and against workers "interests".

"Freight, rail and port logistics play a crucial role in ensuring Australia remains productive and competitive in an increasingly globalised economy," Senator Cash said. "Actions that compromise productivity and put our international reputation at risk do nothing to serve the national interest".

She said industrial action should be a "last resort" and "never be used to promote unrealistic claims which run contrary to the long-term interests of employees".

The MUA, which will vote this year on a proposed merger with the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, did not picket at the Patrick ports, instead directing protests to Senator Cash's office, supported by CFMEU members.

West Australian branch secretary Chris Cain demanded Senator Cash "answer questions" over Alcoa's decision to sack the crew of its MV Portland vessel and remove the workforce from the ship after a two-month stand-off. A spokesman for Senator

Cash said: "The MUA has questions to answer as to why they refused to abide by a Fair Work Commission decision (to end industrial action)."

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