

Canada's Liberal government proposes 84-hour workweek for truck drivers

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Under pressure from the trucking industry, Canada's Liberal government is pressing ahead with a proposal to lengthen the workweek for truck drivers. Claiming a shortage of qualified drivers and using the pretext of an antiquated regulatory regime, the trucking companies are seeking changes that would give them the power to compel drivers to be on the road 84 hours a week. This would have catastrophic safety implications for both the country's 225,000 truck drivers and the general public. As it is, on average more than 130 trucks are involved in accidents on Canada's roads every day.

On June 17, the Standing Committee on Transport and Governmental Operations tabled a report in the House of Commons endorsing the hours of service proposal put forth by the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators (CCMTA) and amended by the Canadian Trucking Alliance in collaboration with the Teamsters union. It is expected that Transport Canada will adopt the proposal in the very near future.

The proposed rule change would "allow" truck drivers to work 14 hours a day, 13 of them driving. A barrage of exceptions, including the possibility of employers obtaining special permits, would potentially expand a trucker's workday to 16 hours.

Under the proposed rule changes drivers would alternately have a mandatory 36-hour "reset" period for every 70 hours of on-duty time within seven consecutive days, or a 72-hour "reset" period for every 120 hours of on-duty time within 14 consecutive days.

In other words, having worked 14 hours a day for five days (70 hours), truckers would then be entitled to a paltry 36 hours off the job, after which they could be "asked" to perform another 14 hour shift—meaning they could log a total of 84 hours in a period of just seven days and two hours.

The government, along with the industry players like

the Canadian Trucking Alliance and the Teamsters union that are pressing for this change, are promoting it as a reduction in the legal workweek for truckers. Under the existing outdated and arcane regulatory regime, it is indeed theoretically possible for a trucker to work more than 104 hours in a given week. However, this rarely if ever happens. According to the lobby group Canadians for Responsible and Safe Highways (CRASH) most Canadian drivers currently work 60 hours in seven days (or alternately, 70 hours in an eight-day cycle).

By contrast, the new rules would make the 84-hour workweek a norm, thus emboldening trucking companies to press their drivers to accept a lengthening of the workday and workweek.

An 84-hour workweek would entail an astounding level of fatigue, and undoubtedly lead to an increase in fatalities—for which individual drivers would be held responsible. In the words of truck driver Peter Turner, initiator of a petition against the proposal: "We don't want to drive 84 hours a week. We know it will be ordinary drivers who will pay the price for the inevitable results of spending 84 hours a week behind the wheel."

It is widely appreciated that the current enforcement regime, in which truckers keep logbooks of their on- and off-duty time, is a completely inadequate check on the hours of service performed by truck drivers. The logbooks, otherwise known as "lie books" or "comic books," are frequently falsified by truckers anxious not to incur management's wrath and lose their livelihood or driven by low wages to accept excessive overtime. Significantly, the proposed rule changes—despite intensive lobbying by some concerned parties—do not require the use of electronic recorders that would prevent this practice.

Trucking industry material promoting its hours of service proposal weighs heavily on the supposed “scientifically-proven” benefits of long hours and a life that includes little but the work of truck driving. David Bradley, CEO of the Canadian Trucking Alliance, boasts that “the trucking industry is leading all other transport industries in its sensitive, sensible and scientific approach to hours of service.”

The trucking industry’s *highwaySTAR* magazine devotes much of an article to extolling the virtues of “14/10 science”—the pseudoscience employed in the effort to convince truckers that working 14 hours a day is good for them! The article suggests that critics of the proposed rules make “the mistaken assumption that time-on-task has a bearing on fatigue. Science has proven that it does not, suggesting instead that sleep loss and circadian disruption are the more significant factors contributing to fatigue. The CCMTA proposal deals with both of these issues.”

Few are taken in by this rhetorical appeal to the scientific benefits of spending close to every waking moment on the job. An April 2002 survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid and commissioned by CRASH revealed that 85 percent of Canadians think the government should not let truckers drive 84 hours a week, and that 78 percent of Canadians think electronic recorders should be required in big rigs. Most Canadians, however, are ignorant of the government-industry proposal. The corporate-controlled media is indifferent to workers’ conditions of employment and the unions have done next to nothing to alert the public to the dangers of the proposed rule changes.

Indeed, the Canadian division of the Teamsters union, which represents 100,000 Canadian truckers, is backing the 84-hour workweek. The Teamsters have justified this support on the grounds that otherwise the federal government would have rubber-stamped the CCMTA’s initial demand for a 14-hour work day, with all 14 of them spent behind the wheel. The Canadian Trucking Alliance was only too happy to modify its proposal to a maximum 13 hours driving so as to gain the support of an organization claiming to represent the collective interests of truck drivers.

Five other unions representing truck drivers, including the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), are opposing the

proposed changes. CEP President Brian Payne has accused the parliamentary committee members of wanting to “sleep snug in their beds,” while condemning “truckers to endless hours of night driving. If they have any conscience at all, they’ll have nightmares as injury and death on our roads increases.”

These statements notwithstanding, the union bureaucrats and their allies in the New Democratic Party have given no indication that they will do anything, apart from issuing ritualistic denunciations, to mobilize opposition to the rapacious demands of the trucking bosses. For its part, the social democratic NDP is championing a 60-hour workweek—the legal norm in the US trucking industry—as the social-democratic “alternative.”

The attempt to lengthen the workday and workweek for truckers is part of a general assault on the minimal legal standards of protection afforded to workers. Canadian capital is seeking to offset its declining international position by trying to return workers to the conditions that existed prior to the great social struggles of the Depression and Second World War years. In Ontario and British Columbia, provincial governments have passed legislation lengthening the workday, gutting health and safety standards, and placing new impediments on workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively. The unions and social democrats have either openly collaborated in this process, or have restricted their opposition to empty protests.

Meanwhile, as every 11 minutes pass, another Canadian truck is in a collision. One in four of these collisions injure someone, and every 15 hours someone in Canada is killed in an accident involving a truck. Increasingly, individual truck drivers are being held responsible for the carnage produced by this brutal work regime. In July 2001, for instance, a Florida trucker who fell asleep and was involved in an accident that killed three people was sentenced to 15 years in prison.



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