Independent truckers stage protests in US

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Independent truckers in the US parked their vehicles, slowed down traffic and rallied in numerous locations across the country beginning Tuesday on the first of three days of protest against soaring fuel prices and declining incomes. The number of drivers participating in the loosely-organized protests is difficult to determine, because hundreds have simply parked their vehicles, but that there is mounting anger over the economic calamity facing many in the industry is indisputable.

The cost of diesel has risen 42 percent in the past year and many drivers assert that they are often losing money by transporting a load. Driver Robert Lee of North Collins, New York, in a typical comment, told the *Buffalo News* that he was taking a week off "to pray for the economy." When he was asked if could afford to do that, Collins told the newspaper that he was not making any money anyway. "It can't hurt me any worse than it is," the trucker said.

This is a list of some of the independent truckers' actions, as reported by the wire services and various local media outlets.

On the New Jersey Turnpike, near New York City, some 200 people took part Tuesday in a protest at a service area, according to *Reuters*. Meanwhile truckers were driving at slow speeds on the Turnpike and disrupting traffic.

Turnpike Authority spokesman Joe Orlando told the *Associated Press* (AP) Tuesday that southbound trucks "as far as the eye can see" were moving at about 20 miles per hour near Newark.

Several truck drivers were ticketed for impeding traffic on Interstate 55 outside Chicago; they were driving three abreast at low speeds.

Near the Port of Tampa in Florida, dozens of independent drivers parked their trucks Tuesday in protest. According to a local television station, some 70 drivers took part. The station reported noted that the $1,200 cost of filling the drivers' tanks, now that diesel fuel has jumped to a record $4.00 a gallon, "means they are losing money because they often are paid less than that per load.

"I don't have a plan B. What am I going to do?" trucker Julio Rodriguez told *Fox News*. "Right now, I can't go back to school; I'm too broke. Who's going to take care of my family?"

At the same protest, AP quoted David Santiago, 35, a driver for 17 years, who said, "We can no longer haul their stuff for what they're paying," referring to contractors. Santiago said he can't support his family on what he makes. "If it wasn't for my wife, we would have been bankrupt already."

In Baldwin, Florida, near Jacksonville, 49-year-old Charles Rotenbarger, from Columbus, Ohio, told the AP: "The oil company is the boss, what are we going to be able to do about it? The whole world economy is controlled by the oil companies. There's nothing we can do about it." Jimmy Lowry, 51, of St. Petersburg, Florida, told the wire service that companies are paying as little as 87 cents a mile although it costs $1 a mile to drive a tractor trailer. The price of ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel has risen from $2.463 per gallon in February 2007 to the present $4.00.

Reuters reported that some trucks were sporting signs reading "$4 diesel = higher food costs. Can you afford to eat?" One Florida-based driver commented, "Our fuel costs have doubled over the past five years and the cost of doing business has doubled. Our industry is in ruins and the rest of the economy is going into a huge tailspin."

The *Knoxville* (Tennessee) *News Sentinel*, in a report on a local protest, took note of the situation confronting Chattanooga driver Marty Stalvey. "Two or three years ago, his monthly fuel bill was about $2,000. It is now $3,000 ... At the same truck stop, Arkansas native Roy Yates said it now costs more than $600 to fill up his 170-gallon tank on his tractor trailer."

Some thirty independent truckers staged a protest Tuesday in their rigs at the state capitol in Atlanta, Georgia. "Fuel goes up, and the mills wont pay us any more. We can't continue to keep going like we are going. I've shut my truck down and am done," truck driver Madrid Thomas told television station WMGT in Macon, Georgia. One of the protest organizers, Sheila Walker, added, "Let me put it to you like this, I have had three paychecks in the past three months where my fuel bill has been more than my check."

Some 250 truckers traveled from Macon to Atlanta Tuesday in a convoy to protest rising fuel costs, slowing down traffic on I-285. They had planned a larger rally in Atlanta, but failed to obtain permits.

Dozens of truckers parked their vehicles along Expressway 83 near Pharr in southern Texas, near the Mexican border, to express their anger. The *Monitor* in McAllen, Texas, cited the case of one of the drivers, Art Martinez of San Juan, who explained "it costs nearly $1,200 each time he fills each of his trucking company's four semis. ... 'Each day is getting more difficult,' Martinez said. 'The diesel is going up and we get paid the same. ... I don't want to get rich; I just want to feed my family and pay the bills.'"

Mike Nidever, an independent operator from Seattle, Washington, parked his truck Tuesday at a truck stop in Richfield, Ohio, where he plans to remain in protest for 48 hours, and told *Fox News* in Cleveland, "Guys like me aren't going to make it too much longer the way fuel prices are jumping."

The *Associated Press* reported on a protest by dozens of independent drivers on I-40 in Galloway, Arkansas, near Little Rock. Dan Burri, a driver for J.B. Hunt, was there to support his fellow drivers. "We don't want only the government to know, but the citizens we provide service to," Burri told the AP. "If we go down, so will the economy of this country."

Maryland trucker Randy Frey told WBAL-TV in Baltimore that he was planning on joining the protest. "It costs me almost about $1,100 to fill my truck up every other day to every three days," Frey told the television station, explaining that the prices were putting him out of business. "My gross pay is $569 for two loads. I brought home $34.74," he commented. "We can't do anything right now. It's hard."

Truckers protested in the Kansas City, Missouri, area. A local television station cited the comment of driver Jim Scott: "The grocery bills are going up, the electricity. The energy rates are going up. This economy is in the tank!"

Tracy Reinke, an independent trucker told the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star-Tribune* that diesel fuel costs were now gobbling up two-thirds of his revenue, compared with one-third a year ago. "The big trucking companies buy a lot of fuel and get a discount, but the little guy doesn't,'

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Reinke, who owns two semitrailer trucks, told the newspaper. “If I have a major breakdown on a truck—an engine or a transmission—I won’t have enough money to fix it.”

The *Sioux City* (Iowa) *Journal* spoke to Joe Rowley, a driver from Mississippi who parked his truck Tuesday in the Sioux City area, who explained: “I’ve had loads that paid less than the fuel to haul them—it’s eating us alive.” The *Journal* noted: “He [Rowley] said fuel costs are eating into his profit, making it difficult for him to pay his monthly bills, which include a $1,632 truck payment. He has to keep making the truck payment until July 2009, but said he wasn’t sure if he will make it.”

On Monday hundreds of truckers circled the capitol building in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, honking their horns in protest and calling on Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell to eliminate the state’s diesel-fuel tax of 38.1 cents per gallon, the highest in the US. Hillary Clinton, campaigning in the state for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, met with the truckers, who held up signs saying “Fair Fuel Prices Now!” Clinton made no commitments of any kind, merely suggesting that more regulation of the energy markets was worth looking at.

Several hundred trucks are expected to participate in a convoy Friday morning in West Virginia, nicknamed the “Hillbilly Express,” beginning in Braxton County and ending at the state capitol in Charleston. Speaking of diesel fuel prices, driver Gary Davis told the local news media, “It’s just gone beyond reason.” Davis explained that many trucking companies are eliminating employees or parking their trucks to make up for the increase and, he explained to the *West Virginia MetroNews*, “they’ve had enough of it.”

One of the organizers of this week’s protest, Dan Little, the owner of a cattle-hauling business in Missouri, told the *Lancaster* (Pennsylvania) *Intelligencer-Journal* that he had been trying for months to reach senators and congressmen in Washington to explain to them the independent drivers’ plight. He failed to get past receptionists.

“When your top two men in political offices [in Washington] are oil-related, you’re going to dance with the one that brought you, aren’t you,” Little told the newspaper. “It’s a damn shame when you have to pay a politician to listen to you.”

The actions of the truckers, however the events this week turn out, speak to growing outrage and social resistance in the American working class in response not only to the destruction of jobs and a continuous decline in living standards. Workers in this country have eyes. They have seen the accumulation of vast wealth by a handful even as a criminal government has launched a war based on lies, democratic rights are threatened, and millions face the prospect of losing their homes. The recent jump in fuel and food prices is pushing many to the limit.

A cursory glance at some of the blogs where independent drivers and others express their opinions about the current situation provides some insight into the depth of anger and revulsion. There is much confusion, including occasional anti-immigrant bigotry and “libertarian” populist demagogy, but the level of social alienation is unmistakable.

Here are a few examples from Tuesday’s comments on www.topix.com:

From Jasper, Tennessee: “As long as we all keep paying the price at the pump it will never come back down. There is no reason for fuel to be at the price it is today. President Bush is allowing his cronies to monopolize every market it can before he’s out of office. Bush is an oil man himself, he could care less what happens to the rest of the country. He proved that with the Iraq war and our 3,000 dead soldiers.”

From St. Louis, Missouri: “Working men have to stand up for what they feel is right. When you’re getting screwed out of every cent you’re trying to bring into your home because it all has to go into the pump, that is wrong, people. The upper-class oil men are making billions and we are struggling to put hotdogs on the table because we are so busy working our butts off trying to line their pockets.”

From Glenwood, New Mexico: “The bad shape America is in, the high cost of everything and going higher, How are people/the working class people going to keep there head above water?”

From Rome, Georgia: “I’m not a truck driver, and would suffer if the drivers do strike, but you know what? I say GO FOR IT!!!!!! If you guys strike, I’ll shut my store in support, and put a sign in the window telling folks why we’re closed. The fuel surcharges are killing me, and I can only pass on so much to the customer before they quit buying. I’ve been faxing my ‘representatives’ weekly, all I ever get are platitudes from one, not a damn word from the other, I’m over it!”

From Jupiter, Florida: “Funny how the price of EVERYTHING has gone up and the reason “THEY” give us is GAS PRICES. Gas prices are driving up those costs. ...

“The truckers have not received ONE CENT of these higher prices. Corporate America has!!! Record profits across the board. ...

“If we only knew how powerful we could be if we ALL went on strike, and I don’t mean truckers, I mean the average working American. How far are we supposed to let this go before we say ...

“E N O U G H!!!!!!!!!!”

From Annapolis, Maryland: “We need to back the truckers in this strike ... !! The oil companies are making billions in profits in their greediness!! It has GOT to stop now!!”

From Baton Rouge, Louisiana: “I am a company driver. My truck is sitting in the driveway. I am a single mother of 3 + 2 that belong to a friend who just dropped her kids off and didn’t come back. My parents keep my kids and hers while I’m on the road. Neither of my parents are able to work so not only am I supporting my 3, but I also support her 2 and my parents. I said all that to point out that I really can’t afford to strike. I was supposed to go back to work yesterday. I didn’t because I totally agree with the strike. No, I can’t afford to strike, but that’s usually the reason people do ... to make better working conditions.”

From Leesburg, Florida: “If truckers and the general public joined forces! Don’t buy fuel for one day (to start). ... What happened to our protection from price gouging? Monopolies? Anti-trust ... Where?

“The stock market ruined millions of people’s lives in the 30s. Is it OK to repeat by buying oil and speculating with stability of our economy on the line?”

From Hampton, New Hampshire: “It’s not just your industry that’s suffering. Everyone in the country that has to punch a clock or try to squeeze out some profits in a small business are hurting. Meanwhile, the so-called free-marketers on Wall Street and Corporations continue to suck every last dime out of the American worker. Wall Street gets bailed out (Bear Stearns) while Main Street continues to get screwed. CEOs continue to rape and pillage companies while the average worker gets thrown to the curb (Pioneer Financial.) And what do Americans do about it? Nothing! It’s time for the peasants to grab the pitchforks and storm the castles...”

From Garden City, Kansas: “I am in a poor family, and we do live paycheck to paycheck, but I still want the strike. I know it will be hard, but, damn it, humans have lived through so much we can take a little more strife. We are adaptable, and we need to adapt. So strike, and pray that a better future will come so our children don’t have to pay.”

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