

Teamsters shut down truckers strike at southern California ports

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Truck drivers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach will return to work today after the Teamsters union shut down a largely ceremonial five-day strike by 150 drivers at the two Southern California harbors on Saturday. The deal, which was brokered by Los Angeles' Democratic Mayor Eric Garcetti, will do nothing to address the servitude-like conditions port drivers face.

Announcing the deal, Garcetti said, "Following the city's meetings with both sides, the Teamsters have agreed to pull down their pickets and enter a cooling off period to allow the harbor commission time to investigate the serious allegations regarding worker safety, poor working conditions and unfair labor practices. Business at the port is back to normal, and the city will facilitate a dialogue among the parties in the weeks ahead."

Almost 40 percent of the nation's imports come through these ports and a strike that shut them down would have had significant economic impact, likely prompting intervention by the Obama administration. From the beginning, however, the Teamsters limited the action to picketing just three firms—Total Transportation Services Inc. (TTSI), Pacific 9 Transportation, and Green Fleet Systems—which represent only four percent of the total registered trucks at the ports.

The struggle was further isolated by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which did everything to block a unified struggle by truckers and 20,000 dockworkers at West Coast ports who have been working without a contract since July 1. On Tuesday, July 8, dockworkers honored the truckers' picket lines, essentially shutting down the ports. Behind the scenes, however, the ILWU and Port Authorities agreed to a three-day extension of the expired contract, which includes a no-strike pledge. This enabled an arbitrator to force dockworkers back to work, saying their solidarity action was a violation of their "contract."

Port trucker drivers face a real fight. Transport

companies classify them as self-employed "independent contractors" instead of "employees" in order to dump the costs of fuel, truck maintenance and repair on the drivers. By the time they pay all of these deductions—plus the cost of leasing their trucks—workers have little left in their paychecks. Moreover, the companies are not required to pay Social Security, pensions, unemployment or workers' compensation insurance for "independent contractors," nor do they have to abide by federal wage and hour laws that cover employees.

The average container yields a worker \$48, but that single container can sometimes take up to seven, eight, nine, or ten hours to deliver. Workers end up driving six days a week for more than 10 hours a day to make ends meet. In some cases paychecks are negative because a worker was only able to deliver one container, and costs far outweighed their compensation. Generally paychecks are irregular for these workers—many of whom are immigrants—and they receive between \$200 and \$800 a week, depending on their assignment and maintenance costs.

Roughly 80 percent of US port truckers are misclassified in a similar fashion, according to studies. The Teamsters web site notes, "With trucking deregulation 30 years ago, a shadowy network of contract trucking companies that illegally classify their company drivers as 'independent contractors' was born. Port trucking wages alone fell 30 percent from 1980, when independent contracting was rare, to 1995 when it was dominant."

Trucking, as well as airline, deregulation, however, was spearheaded by former US Senator Edward Kennedy and signed into law by President Jimmy Carter—both icons of the Democratic Party, which the Teamsters promote as friends of labor. Over the last three-and-a-half decades, the Teamsters have responded to the expansion of non-union trucking companies by signing contracts seeking to

give unionized employers a cost advantage. That has led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs and wage and benefit cuts that have produced the miserable conditions truckers face today.

The main concern of the Teamsters union executives is that the classification of truckers as “independent contractors” blocks them from “organizing” port truckers and collecting dues.

Union officials are seeking the assistance of the Democratic Party to augment their revenue, while pledging to suppress any struggle by workers that would undermine the profit interests of corporate America.

Last week, WSWs reporters went to the Evergreen terminal at the port of Los Angeles where a group of 20 to 25 picketers gathered. Under the instruction of Teamsters officials, the strikers were allowed to block traffic for two or three minutes at a time and then allow ten to twelve trucks to come in and out of the terminal. This demoralizing exercise was repeated again and again at what was supposed to be the major site of the strike.

Alex and Agustin, two striking workers, spoke with the WSWs. Agustin explained the three companies “violate our rights as workers” by misclassifying them as self-employed contractors. This practice, Alex explained, makes workers responsible for costs, leaving workers with “very little for ourselves.”

Alex said the company was trying to divide workers for the past 16 months. “They have hired undercover union-busters that have threatened the drivers. One driver was actually threatened with his life.” He noted that the company had ceased firing workers for the time being because of their unfair labor practice suits. However, he said retaliation continued within the workplace, with those opposing unionization efforts getting the easiest routes and always having work.

When our reporter asked Alex and Agustin about the impact of the picket lines on the ILWU, the Teamsters picket captain, who had been listening in on the conversation, interjected and said “we do not know anything about that ... you have to speak to them.”

After the two striking workers left, the remaining pickets were largely various union officials, particularly from the SEIU and the IBT. When WSWs reporters asked them about the isolated nature of the action, officials said the truck workers’ struggle had nothing to do with the ILWU.

The WSWs also spoke to Tonio and Aristides, both of whom had previously been truck drivers at the port. Tonio explained wages in the 1980’s were much higher than

they are now, noting that employers had pushed drivers into a “race to the bottom.”

Aristides, another ex-port truck driver, worked for TTSI before being fired in 2009. He told the WSWs, “Previous to 2008 there were no lease drivers and no hourly drivers in these companies. Containers and other cargo were moved out of the port by owner-operators (people who owned their tractor trucks and contracted their services to the terminals).”

In 2008, the employers mandated that the nominally independent truck drivers switch over to newer trucks because of new environmental regulations. The first five new trucks at TTSI were purchased by the company and then fully sold to the workers.

Aristides continued, “By 2009, however, the terms had been changed and former owner operators had to lease the trucks, pay maintenance costs, tires, fuel. They even had to pay to park the trucks at the terminals.

“When in 2009 I denounced the new leases, for violating the original agreement, I was fired for being a ‘rotten apple.’”

When our reporter drew attention to the limited, isolated, character of the strike, Aristides agreed, saying, “The way things are going nothing will be gained. The strikers are following a protocol by stopping truck traffic only a few minutes at a time. I am sure this was agreed upon by the Teamsters, the police, and maybe the terminals.”

The shutting down of the port strike—the fourth similarly limited action called by the Teamsters this year—only underscores the fact that there is no way forward for truckers to improve their conditions if their struggle is left in the hands of pro-company unions, which are directly tied to the Democratic Party and the profit system they defend. Only the development of a mass, independent, movement of the working class to overthrow the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and big business can ensure that the basic social rights of the working class.



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