

Port truck drivers strike in southern California

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Dozens of truck drivers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach went on strike Thursday morning protesting unfair labor practices, including lower than minimum wage pay, the theft of wages, intimidation and retaliatory firing. This is the fifth time truckers have engaged in such a job action this year.

Last July, the Teamsters drivers shut down a five-day strike with no resolution of the issues. The union once again limited the strike to an isolated walkout by a small number of drivers. This underscores that the chief concern of the union is to demonstrate its reliability to the port owners and the local Democratic Party establishment. If the union is allowed to gain the franchise among port drivers and a new source of income from union dues, the Teamsters are signaling, the union will partner with the companies to cut costs and boost profits.

The issues facing port drivers are very real and have implications that go far beyond the ports. The three transport companies—Total Transportation Services Inc. (TTSI), Pacific 9 Transportation, and Green Fleet System—classify drivers as “independent contractors” and “business owners” in order to skirt wage, hour and collective bargaining protections provided to most regular employees. The companies also sharply reduce their costs by foisting the expense of fuel, truck maintenance and health insurance onto the drivers themselves, who, to add insult to injury, are forced to pay the companies fees to lease the trucks they drive.

After all of these deductions, truckers commonly receive “negative” paychecks. Such was the case of Daniel Linares, a truck driver working for Pacific 9 at the Los Angeles/Long Beach ports. Last August, he received a paycheck of -\$296.47, despite gross earnings of nearly \$3,200 that month.

Most of the truck drivers are immigrants, often

undocumented, and the companies take full advantage of their precarious status to subject them to hyper-exploitation.

Alex, a driver with experience in the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports, told the World Socialist Web Site, “Working by the hour for TTSI was a disaster. I’ve ended up working for \$10 an hour—it’s impossible. As an incentive, if you carry more than five loads in a day you got an extra \$25 dollars per load. The problem is you wouldn’t ever be able to reach five loads in your 8-hour day.”

“It’s a complete disaster working at the ports,” he said. As for the union, he stated, “The Teamsters are hovering over us like parasites conducting themselves like a Mafia. Their role is to pressure companies to hire workers by the hour so they can unionize us and get our dues.”

Alex explained the reality of being a so-called independent contractor. “Today, as owners of our own business we pay for the maintenance of the truck, the diesel, tires, repairs. I once got fired because I spoke up about a lease fraud TTSI was committing. Then I worked with Pacific 9. I had to pay for parking, gasoline, washing the truck, everything. The work was really bad, I once took a check home of \$165 for one week’s pay. I went bankrupt.”

Commenting on the broader implications of the brutal working conditions port drivers face, Alex said, “Worst of all is the schedule. I’d work more than 14 hours a day, from 10 am to 3 am. I’d sleep in my truck, wake up, get back to driving. So many accidents happen on the highways because of the conditions the truckers face. These conditions affect truckers as well as the general public. A trucker who’s desperate to support his family will work long hours into exhaustion. He’s tired, falls asleep at the wheel and kills people as a

result.”

The exposure of outright wage theft has led various demagogic politicians to step in, in an effort to dissipate social anger. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, a Democrat, staged a pro forma investigation following last July's strike. This was coordinated with the Teamsters, which shut down the strike, telling workers their grievances could be resolved through appeals to the Democrats and the national and state labor relations boards.

The only thing to come out of this policy was TTSI's firing of 33 drivers for refusing to drop their legal claim before the California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement for \$4.8 million in back pay and damages.

Mayor Garcetti stepped in again Thursday, declaring that an agreement had been reached between drivers and Green Fleet Systems for another “cooling-off” period, leading to the wind-down of the strike.

Workers cannot place their trust in any of these pro-business unions. This includes the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which is currently in talks for a new labor agreement covering 20,000 dockworkers. The ILWU has kept its members at work for more than four months since the expiration of their last agreement on July 1.

The unions are doing everything they can to prevent a unified struggle by drivers and other port workers, which would effectively shut down the ports' multi-billion-dollar operations on the eve of the holiday season. Such an action would impact the entire US economy and immediately lead to a political confrontation with the Democratic-run state government and the Obama administration. A genuine struggle, which could only be conducted independently of and in opposition to the trade unions, would win popular support from workers around the US and internationally facing similar attacks.

Although there are jurisdictional conflicts between the Teamsters and ILWU over members and dues money, when it comes to a threat of a movement of the working class from below, the well-paid executives who run both of these unions are united in their effort to suppress worker resistance.

This was shown last July—at the end of the first day of the truckers' strike, at a time when joint action would have been most effective, the ILWU decided to take a 72-hour break from its new contract negotiations,

thereby extending the conditions of the old agreement which included a no-strike pledge. When some dock workers left their posts to join the truckers' picket lines, a labor arbitrator immediately ordered them back to work citing the no-strike clause in the old contract, which the ILWU then enforced.

The largely symbolic strike called by the Teamsters Thursday is a signal to the ILWU and the employers that the union will do everything to block the truckers' struggle from expanding to other sections of port workers. The Teamsters, like the ILWU, have intimate ties with Garcetti as well as Governor Jerry Brown and Obama.

All of these forces take their marching orders from powerful business circles. In a letter sent to President Obama last week urging a federal mediator to step in, the National Retail Federation and other business groups wrote, “The sudden change in tone is alarming and suggests that a full shutdown of every West Coast port may be imminent. The impact this would have on jobs, down-stream consumers, and the business operations of exporters, importers, retailers, transportation providers, manufacturers and other stakeholders would be catastrophic.”

The port drivers and dockers, like every other section of the working class, face a political struggle not just against this or that employer but against the entire capitalist economic and political set up. Every institution—from the Obama administration, the Democrats and Republicans, the courts, labor relations boards and the unions—all defend the dictatorship of the banks and big corporations over society. To fight this anti-working class gang-up, port drivers and dockers must take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the Teamsters, the ILWU and the other pro-business unions, and set up fighting committees, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers, to defend the needs of workers not the profit drive of big business.



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