

Truck drivers strike at Los Angeles-Long Beach ports

Our reporters
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A group of truck drivers and warehouse workers struck the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, Monday against trucking firms that misclassify drivers as “independent contractors” to skirt minimum wage and overtime laws and deny them health insurance, unemployment benefits and workers compensation.

The job action called by Teamsters Local 848 involves about 100 workers at California Cartage, XPO Logistics and other companies. On Tuesday, the strike spread to Rancho Dominguez in the Los Angeles area and San Diego Tuesday.

Drivers are demanding reclassification as full-time, hourly employees and improved wages and working conditions. While drivers, many of them immigrant workers who speak little English, have shown enormous determination, the Teamsters and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), have isolated the drivers and limited their action to impotent protests that have done little to disrupt the country’s busiest ports.

In San Diego, Jose, a truck driver for 48 years and a driver for XPO Logistics since 1990, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We have no medical insurance, no health care, no vacation, no security. On top of that I pay up to \$990 a week for the maintenance of my truck, diesel, and other expenses.”

“We have two brothers working on one truck, they have to make \$1,000 every day to cover their truck, gas, family, home. If you don’t have your own truck, the company tricks you into leasing their truck. They say they will only sell the truck for \$45,000, but after interest it ends up being another \$100,000.”

“The unions don’t want us to organize, they tell us that that there is no support for us, that the other drivers don’t support us, but that is not true.”

This is the 15th strike called by the Teamsters over the last four years. In each case, they have been impotent, involving only a tiny fraction of the estimated 16,000 truckers at the ports and none of the 14,000 ILWU dockworkers. At the same time the Teamsters and other unions have encouraged the most debilitating dependence on the courts and Democratic Party. The Teamsters agreed to end the last strike in July 2016 after Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti made a worthless promise to “investigate” abuses.

In the Los Angeles–Long Beach port area—which takes in nearly half of the nation’s container imports—it is estimated that only 10 percent of port truck drivers are directly employed by companies and the others are classified as “independent contractors” or “owner-operators.” All day long these workers move cargo from the docks to nearby warehouses and rail yards where they are shipped to major retailers like Wal-Mart, Amazon and Target.

Garcetti and Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia recently announced their “goal” to convert the ports’ fleet over to zero emission trucks by 2035. Drivers, who have long suffered the devastating health consequences of diesel fuel emissions want cleaner air, expect the companies will pass on the cost to them, forcing drivers to lease the higher-tech trucks that will cost upwards of a half a million dollars.

The issues facing the port truck drivers are immensely important and underscore the brutal exploitation of millions of independent contractors or “1099 employees” (named after the IRS tax form number) whose numbers have increased since the 2008 financial crash. Although the US Labor Department says it does not have exact numbers, it has acknowledged the practice is pervasive, particularly among delivery truck drivers, construction workers,

cable installers and so-called “Gig Economy” workers like Uber and Lyft drivers.

According to an investigation by *USA TODAY*, based on interviews with 300 drivers and testimony in several labor dispute cases, drivers are essentially indentured servants who owe hundreds of thousands of dollars on the trucks they are forced to lease in order to work. The companies hold this debt over the heads of drivers, threatening to take away their trucks and keep tens of thousands of dollars they have already paid if the drivers miss work or quit because they are too exhausted to continue.

In some cases, companies have physically prevented drivers from leaving work, compelled them to work against their will for up to 20 hours a day and would not pay workers anything unless they agreed to falsify logs. In addition to lease payments, the companies charge drivers for maintenance, fuel, parking fees and even toilet paper and other supplies. After such deductions, *USA TODAY* found, drivers can end up making as little as 67 cents a week or even owe money to their employers.

The Teamsters union, which has lost hundreds of thousands of members since the deregulation of the trucking industry in the late 1970s, is anxious to boost its dues base but is blocked from “organizing” port truck drivers due to their classification as independent contractors. Truck drivers should place no confidence in the Teamsters, which has collaborated in the destruction of the living standards of over-the-road drivers—who have seen their real wages fall by half over the last four decades—warehouse workers at UPS and other companies.

A real fight against these slave-like conditions will require new organizations of struggle, controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves and independent of the pro-company unions, to mobilize the broadest support in the working class against big business and both corporate-controlled parties.



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