

“Being an ‘independent contractor’ is just an illusion so they can pocket more money for themselves”

Striking Los Angeles-Long Beach port truck drivers speak

Our reporters
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The strike by 100 truck drivers at the West Coast ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach has highlighted the slave-like conditions that thousands of container truck drivers at the nation’s busiest ports face. It has also underscored the bankruptcy of the Teamsters union, which is expected to call off the limited strike after today, without resolving any of the burning issues confronting port truck drivers.

The drivers are opposed to the companies’ exploitative practices, which can only be described as blatantly criminal. This includes wage theft, the denial of health care and pension benefits and a system of extracting debt payments from drivers that is akin to indentured servitude. The workers reject their classification as “independent contractors” and are demanding that they be recognized and paid as full-time hourly employees.

These workers and other port workers have enormous potential strength. More than 16,000 truckers—the vast majority misclassified as “independent contractors”—move cargo out of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. They, along with more 14,000 dockworkers, handle an average of more than 233 million metric tons of cargo each year valued at more than \$334 billion. The two ports together take in more than half of the country’s containerized imports, which are then sent to major retailers like Amazon, Wal-Mart and Target.

After decades of betraying truck drivers, the Teamsters have only managed to recruit about 500 members at the ports. Nevertheless, they have only called out 100 of their members and limited each picket line to 10 or less. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which has also accepted decades of job cutting and two-tier wages, has done nothing to defend the striking drivers.

A large-scale strike involving even a fraction of the port truckers, longshoreman and more than 890,000 workers involved in port operations throughout the Los Angeles County region would have a massive and widespread impact on the entire foundations of American and even world capitalism.

Instead the Teamsters, the ILWU and other unions have deliberately isolated these embattled workers, making sure that

there is as little disruption to normal operations as possible. The unions, which defend the profit system and are allied to the Democratic Party, have no intention of conducting a serious struggle because it would rapidly win the support of millions of other workers who are incensed over declining living standards, exploding social inequality and Trump’s savage austerity proposals. Such a struggle would also inspire international support, including from dockworkers currently striking in Spain.

Instead the Teamsters are continuing these impotent job actions—the 15th in the last four years—while encouraging workers to place their confidence in Democratic mayors, like Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, and city councils, which are entirely complicit in the exploitation of port truck drivers. The prerequisite of any serious struggle by workers is to reject this debilitating orientation to the big business politicians and to organize independently of the Teamsters and other pro-company unions to mobilize the full strength of the working class.

In contrast to the unions, striking truck drivers expressed enormous determination to fight. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with truckers picketing the Long Beach depot of the Intermodal Bridge Transport (IBT) company. IBT has locations across the United States and boasts that it has “long partnerships with several large based Fortune 500 companies.” Other firms being struck include K & R Transportation, XPO Logistics, Cal Cartage Express, ITS Line Port, XPO Port Service and XPO Cartage.

Hector and Alfredo are veteran truckers serving the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports.

Alfredo said, “We’re on the picket lines today over job misclassification. The companies control the work and mistreat us. They’re taking advantage of us. We don’t get any lunch breaks. The company shows favoritism and retaliation.

“This company used to be all owner-operators. Then the government handed out grants that were supposed to go to drivers to buy new trucks with lower emissions. The companies

took advantage and got the grant money to buy their own fleet. Then they gave the owner operators an option: either you start driving our trucks or you find somewhere else to work.

“The vice president of this company, Ozzie Zea, asked the drivers to sign up for this knowing that a lot of the people do not read English and could not understand the contracts they were signing. The drivers signed and the grant money was given to the company.

“To work here you have to pay \$60 a day to lease the truck, plus cover the fuel costs and 6 or 7 percent off your check for accident insurance. But if you get into an accident and damage the truck they don’t want to go through their insurance. Instead, they deduct it from your paycheck.

“I damaged a truck and at the end of the week they took \$450 out of my check. I asked, ‘Why do I pay for insurance?’ and they just shrugged me off. They sent me upstairs and I had to make payment arrangements. To make matters worse, the company charges you more for insurance not based on your risk but based on your salary. If you make more, they charge you more for insurance.

“Also, on my last paycheck they charged me \$120 because I got sick and their empty container sat here for one day. It’s not my company so why do I have to pay for the container?”

Hector added, “The more you make the more they take. They are getting over on us for workers comp, disability and unemployment insurance—they don’t pay for anything and we’re not covered. We’re also paying their IRS taxes.”

Alfredo said, “They lease the truck night and day, so each driver has to pay a \$60 lease fee every day. That comes out of the drivers’ pockets. We pay all the overhead costs and all the companies are doing is just profiting. There have been some weeks where I actually owed the company money just to work.”

Hector added, “When I first started here we were given a contract that said, ‘Employment Application.’ Six months after we started a misclassification lawsuit they changed it to say ‘Independent Contractor’ on the top of the contract. They brought back the original

contract and said, ‘Just copy all the information from this contract and put it on the second one,’ and made us back-date it. I asked them what was this for, and they said, ‘Either you sign it or you’re not going to get your paycheck or any work on Monday morning.’

“I didn’t have any other choice because I live paycheck to paycheck, so I was forced to sign that contract so they would release my check and I could pay my bills.”

“Being an ‘independent contractor’ is just an illusion so they can pocket more money for themselves. The only reason they misclassify us is so they don’t have to pay payroll taxes to IRS and these other costs.”

Far from being an aberration, such practices employed by IBT are common across the port trucking and logistics industries.

Alfredo said misclassification was prevalent at all the trucking companies at the ports. “They’re making money just from leasing the trucks,” he said. “If you do the calculations: they are getting \$120 every day—for day and night shift—per truck, that’s \$2,700 a month. They are paying something like \$800-900 a month for a lease and pocketing the rest. And they are making money on top of that too.

“They tell us not to pull over to eat our lunch because we will get behind schedule. One time I pulled over to the use the restroom and the dispatcher called me and said it was my fault we missed a delivery appointment. I told them I had to use the restroom and the next day they retaliated by forcing me to take a harder workload.”

Hector added, “They are punishing us because we are out here protesting for our rights. We drive out here for work and they tell us they don’t have any work for us. The guys inside, they manipulate them by giving them an extra container so management can keep them on their side. Those workers know they are misclassified but they stay on the company’s side just for the extra work and money the company gives them.

“The company is trying to push us out because we are fighting for everybody’s rights. We call in and they say there is no work but when you get to the yard you see all these other guys driving loads and they don’t get back until four or five hours later. At the same time, they tell those other guys, ‘If you join them on the picket line, we’re going to fire you.’”

In fact, IBT had provocatively placed large banners advertising new trucker positions at the picket site when WSWs reporters visited there.

“We have families to support like everyone else does,” Alfredo said. “All we are asking for is an hourly rate and benefits, so we can retire one day. The companies don’t see it that way—and they’re not going to see it that way because it is just greed.”

Hector said, “The only reason the companies have the money is because of our work. They wouldn’t get anything if it wasn’t for us but they don’t want to pay what they are supposed to pay us, they don’t want to give us benefits.

“We also don’t have a lot of faith in the politicians. The government knows we are employees but they are not doing anything about it.”



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