

Los Angeles harbor drivers hold three-day strike

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Truck drivers at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California began a three-day strike on Monday over their misclassification as “independent contractors” or “owner operators.” Drayage operators are able to shift much of the cost of business onto the backs of workers by classifying them as independent contractors, rather than employees.

On Monday, several dozen drivers began picketing XPO Logistics and NFI Industries, two large drayage and intermodal companies. XPO is one of the largest logistics companies in the world, employing nearly 100,000 workers and pulling in over \$15 billion in revenue annually.

Independent contractors or owner-operators account for around 90 percent of the harbor truck drivers in Southern California, according to the *Journal of Commerce* (JOC). A *USA Today* investigation last year found that misclassified drayage truck drivers typically lease the trucks they drive from their employers, pay for their own gas and maintenance, and often have irregular and uncertain hours. It is not uncommon for these workers to end up owing their company money at the end of each week. This is on top of having almost no health insurance, vacation or job security to speak of.

The *USA Today* report found, “Bosses create a culture of fear by firing drivers, suspending them without pay or reassigning them the lowest-paying routes ... To keep drivers working, managers at a few companies have physically barred them from going home.

“Drivers at Pacific 9 Transportation testified that their managers dispatched truckers up to 20 hours a day, then wouldn’t pay them until drivers falsified inspection reports that track hours. Hundreds of California port truckers have gotten into accidents, leading to more

than 20 fatalities from 2013 to 2015.”

Violence against workers is not unheard of either. The Teamsters reported that a driver named Joel Mejia, who worked for Pacific Green Trucking, was “summarily terminated, brutally beaten, threatened with death, and physically dragged out of the office” by the company’s co-owner and director of operations in early August, after Mejia complained about wage theft.

On top of this, these workers are predominantly immigrants and live in an area that just last week saw ICE raids detain some 150 people. At the end of the three-day strike there will be a protest against the ending of Temporary Protected Status cosponsored by the Teamsters, the Democratic Socialists of America, (DSA) and a host of other Democratic Party-aligned organizations.

While workers are undoubtedly determined to fight these oppressive conditions, the Teamsters bureaucracy is pursuing its own financial and institutional interests, which are separate from and hostile to those of the workers now on strike.

The Teamsters want the classification of these workers changed because, by law, “independent contractors” cannot be unionized. The main aim of the union is to recruit a new layer of dues-paying members while proving their worth to the employers by stabilizing the workforce and lowering turnover.

The Teamsters have championed a recently passed California bill, SB-1402, which purports to punish companies that misclassify workers. Notably, the bill pushed by state and local Democrats contains language that may exempt employers from its restrictions, so long as their employees (or contractors) are covered by a “bona fide” collective bargaining agreement.

This is the 16th strike by the Teamsters over misclassification in a span of five years. Like the

current strike, the union has limited the actions to token picketing by a few dozen workers, appeals for consumer boycotts and joint protests with clergyman and Democratic Party politicians.

At no point have the Teamsters or any other unions actually sought to shut down the nation's busiest port by mobilizing the hundreds of thousands of workers employed at the greater harbor complex. Similarly, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has kept total silence on the strike, despite the interconnection of dockworkers and drayage drivers in the logistics chain.

A report from the JOC emphasizes the impotence of the unions, noting, “[The] three-day, Teamsters union-driven protest set to begin Monday will draw attention to the cause but will have minimal to no impact on cargo flow at the Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex, based on the last 15 of such efforts... Previous attempts have had a minimal impact on cargo handling at the largest US port complex. Since the events are usually pre-announced, port police are positioned to ensure ingress and egress at the terminals.”

The real role of the Teamsters can be seen at United Parcel Service where the union is pushing for a new contract for 230,000 UPS workers that would maintain poverty wages for part-time workers—who make up more than two-thirds of the workforce—and create a new tier of delivery truck drivers with lower pay and more responsibilities, to, as the Teamsters put it, “give UPS greater flexibility.”

A serious walkout at the ports could quickly cripple national and international supply chains. The connected Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach together handle over 15 million TEUs, 20-foot shipping containers that are standard around the world. Over 800,000 workers are directly employed by the ports or businesses connected to them.

A real struggle is only possible if workers take the conduct of this fight into their own hands. Drivers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the Teamsters and other unions, to link up their struggle with every other section of workers, including UPS and Amazon workers and Los Angeles teachers.

Such a fight will immediately pit workers against the Democratic Party, which defends the interests of the giant corporations just as ruthlessly as the Republicans.



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