

“This bill is going to destroy so many families”

Under threat of arrests, trucker protest at Oakland Ports enters second week

Our reporters
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On Monday, dozens of truck owner-operators rallied in the Port of Oakland, California. For more than a week, truckers have been at the port to demand they be exempted from California State Assembly Bill 5 (AB5), which was passed to reclassify independent contractors as company employees. The rule was nominally to protect Uber and Lyft drivers from extreme exploitation, but under the current interpretation, most of California's 70,000 truck owner-operators will be forced to take on onerous additional costs and administrative work as a result of the law, sell their trucks and become employees of larger companies or leave the state.

The protests last week shut down most port operations, resulting in an ultimatum from the port operators threatening truckers with arrest if they continued to block terminal gates. Although the demonstration Monday was smaller than the hundreds who gathered last week, truckers remain determined.

On Monday, the truckers participating in the Port of Oakland rally began assembling at 7:00 a.m. A heavy police presence kept the port open, with truckers told to remain in designated “free speech zones” or face arrest. The port managers designated four of these areas in reaction to truckers’ blockades of entrances, which found support from many dockworkers who refused to cross the truckers’ picket line. Across the West Coast, 22,000 dockworkers are being kept on the job by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union without

a contract.

The organization of the protests have been largely ad hoc, and protesting owner-operators have refrained from identifying leaders, partially out of concern that they will be victimized in past struggles. George, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, explained that the leader of a 2005 trucker action was subject to intimidation by the ports, including a legal subpoena. Speaking of an earlier action, George continued, “The Port of Oakland sued the leader in 1999 for \$1.5 million.”

Tom, another owner-operator whose name has been changed, gave an example of corruption among former trucker protest leaders. “Ten years ago, we all gave money to get a lawyer, \$100 or \$200 each. The leader took the money and we never got the lawyer.”

Solomon, a truck owner-operator from Eritrea with three years’ experience, spoke out against this antidemocratic attack on truckers’ freedom of speech and assembly. “This is the place allowed for the truckers to continue their protest,” he said, pointing to the paper sign posted on an orange plastic barricade surrounded by caution tape, “but this is ridiculous. You see ‘Free Speech Zone.’ You don't need a zone to speak freely. You should speak freely anywhere and everywhere.

“I’m here to oppose the bill AB5. We are demanding the governor of California to exempt us from AB5 because it is taking freedom from truckers, especially owner-operators. Many truckers are going to join us and we are going to continue the protest that we started a week ago and we are sticking with that strike.

“Truckers need to stick together. This bill is taking our freedom. We have no choice but to stick with this

strike.”

Asked what impact AB5 would have on truck owner-operators, Solomon replied, “It costs us everything. We can’t manage. In the trucking business, we can’t survive. This bill is going to destroy so many families. It’s going to kill the dreams of our kids. We need to be exempted from this bill.”

Typically, owner-operators acquire their trucks by pooling their resources and those of family members. Their trucks are the result of years of sacrifice. As owner-operators, they have the flexibility of setting their own time schedule, and share the operations of their truck with other individuals, often family members. None of that would be possible under AB5. At best, truckers would be part of a “two-two” check system, working for wages for a firm (first check) that would also “rent” their truck (second check). This would leave them open to exploitative wages, grueling schedules and loss of control of their trucks.

Opposing paternalistic claims by the Democratic Party and the trade unions that AB5 is for the truckers’ own good, Solomon explained, “We didn’t demand this. They are pretending that the truck owners are demanding this for protection. I’ve never seen any owner-operator say we need AB5 for protection.”

Asked about his thoughts on the Democrats and Republicans, Solomon continued: “Politicians: It’s always false promises. Once they get the position, they serve the rich people. They don’t serve the mass. They don’t care. They’re taking the income of millions of truck drivers and giving it to one or two billionaire guys, like Amazon. That’s what they’re trying to do. They’re taking our freedoms, our rights, everything.”

While some workers claimed there was no need for leadership as long as truckers remained united in opposition to AB5, there was substantial interest in the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call to unite with rank-and-file dockworkers.

When a WSWS reporter called for truckers to join forces with dockworkers, Solomon went one step further, saying, “It’s not just truckers unite with dock workers, the whole of America should be united. When these things happen, we need to stick together. We should protect our kids and welfare.”

Asked the way forward, Solomon made a call to action. “Everybody has to join us. The media are not covering our protests because the media are serving the

rich people. Everybody has to be united and organized. Everybody has to join us for the campaign to exempt us from this bill. We all need to stand together.”

When a WSWS reporter noted the connection between the wars in Ukraine and beyond and the Biden administration’s efforts to keep the ports open to ensure the flow of war materiel, Solomon expressed firm opposition to war. “War is not the solution. America has been in a proxy war in so many countries. This is draining the economy and it’s not bringing any solution. The right choice is not to mobilize the whole world and fight against countries. I don’t like the proxy war in Ukraine. It’s really affecting the Ukrainians. It’s not only a war between the US and Russia or the west and the east. It’s really affecting the Ukrainians. This war could be avoided. It’s become now the reason so many Ukrainians are displaced. America should stay away from war and focus on its internal economics and its own population.”

The protests in Oakland are a continuation of road blockages that took place in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach on July 13.

In the United States alone, West Coast dockworkers have been working without a contract since July 1. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union has been meeting in secret with the port administrators and the Biden administration in a bid to prevent a strike. At the same time, railroad workers have voted by 99.5 percent in favor of a strike, but the Biden administration is likely to intervene and appoint an emergency board to prevent a walkout.

It is crucial that the truck drivers engaged in the California struggle understand their protest strike as part of a powerful link with logistic workers across the world. By breaking their isolation from the global strike movement, they can defeat the conditions of hunger wages, exploitation, growing inequality and war that affect workers across the world.



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