

“We’ll be so powerful if we could organize worldwide”: New York-New Jersey port trucker speaks about conditions facing drivers

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Truckers, tell us what your working conditions are like by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept confidential.

Recently, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Richie Respek, a New York-New Jersey port trucker and founder of the Pier Trucker Facebook group, about the long hours, unpaid labor and deteriorating working conditions truck drivers face.

Approximately 16,000 truckers haul freight from the New York-New Jersey ports, according to Respek, with an estimated 75 to 85 percent classified as owner-operators. These drivers transport containers from ports and rail yards to warehouses across the Northeast and beyond.

Opposition is growing among truckers. In the US, many organized an October 1 work stoppage against soaring diesel prices as a result of the Iran war, low freight rates and mounting operating costs. The action was called through social media independently of the Teamsters union and the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA).

The action followed the September 3–6 blockade by hundreds of Mexican truckers at the Mexicali-Calexico and San Luis Río Colorado-Yuma border crossings against the Trump administration’s mass revocation of B-1 visas. Organized through WhatsApp, the blockade held up an estimated \$800 million a day in cargo. In early October, Mexican drivers also called for a national strike to free a fellow trucker detained after a collision with federal agents, denouncing official accounts of the crash and widespread extortion on the highways.

“All hours worked, all hours paid”

Respek has worked in trucking for more than 10 years. He began as a company driver, later delivered fuel and then became an owner-operator in port drayage, transporting containers from ports and rail yards to inland warehouses. He subsequently sold his truck and returned to driving for a company.

“A typical workday would be me getting up around 4:30 in the morning, getting to work by 5:00,” he said. “It’s not a tough job. It’s just that it’s very time-consuming. We normally do 50-plus hours a week.”

Company drivers can work 50, 60 or as many as 70 hours a week without receiving the time-and-a-half overtime pay that applies to

many other workers after 40 hours.

“If I get paid 25 bucks an hour, I get just 25 bucks an hour for 70 hours,” Respek explained.

Owner-operators are generally paid per load rather than by the hour. Time spent waiting in lines at ports or for containers to be loaded or unloaded at warehouses is unpaid.

“They’re at the piers in long lines waiting to get the container; they’re not getting paid for that,” Respek said. “Or when they’re at the warehouse waiting to get offloaded or loaded, they’re not getting paid for that either.”

Owner-operators also pay for fuel without being able to inspect what the companies charge customers to cover it. Respek said employers are supposed to collect a fuel surcharge to subsidize drivers’ expenses. “But since we don’t have transparency, we suspect that they’re keeping it for themselves and giving us nothing.”

He described the demands drivers would raise if they organized a strike: “All hours worked, all hours paid.”

“We want transparency,” he continued. “We want to see the freight bill, and we want to have respect and dignity in the workplace as well.”

Workers “disguised as independent contractors”

Respek explained that independent owner-operators have their own operating authority and insurance, whereas lease-on owner-operators own their trucks but operate under another company’s authority. Though presented as “independent” businesses, the latter depend on the companies for work while bearing the costs of buying and maintaining their trucks, fuel, and other expenses.

Many owner-operators, he explained, “don’t think of themselves as workers; they think of themselves as temporarily embarrassed capitalists. But in reality, they are working-class people who are being disguised as independent contractors.

“Some of these drivers get into debt to buy a truck,” he said. “Some of these drivers are driving substandard trucks that are old.”

Respek described their conditions as “exploitative” and “abusive,” summarizing them as “long hours, low pay and no benefits.

“A lot of these drivers have precarious immigration status,” he said. “As you know, the Trump administration is clamping down hard on immigrant truck drivers. So a lot of them are scared to stand up for

themselves, or scared to say anything.”

Respek cited the Association of Bi-State Motor Carriers, which represents trucking companies in New York and New Jersey, describing its lobbying against measures that could classify drivers as employees.

“They’re doing whatever they can to make sure that drivers can never be classified properly as employees,” he said.

Respek founded the Pier Trucker Facebook group as a communication portal where drivers could exchange information and connect with others throughout the ports. It now has approximately 10,500 members.

“I wanted to create a center where we could all communicate with one another and share information,” he said. The membership also includes longshoremen, port officials and other interested readers.

“Truck drivers, we spend a lot of time isolated from one another,” he said. “We’re in our truck. We’re far apart from one another. So the time that we do get to meet up face to face, it’s always very short and far apart.”

Asked about the October 1 stoppage, Respek said: “Most of the workers went to work, a small number stayed at home.” But “there’s been numerous attempts to organize a strike or a boycott,” he added.

Organizing workers across language barriers is crucial, he added. “They speak Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, whatever,” he said. “You can organize all the Hispanic drivers, but then you’re missing the other half, which aren’t Hispanic.”

Respek said he had seen videos of Will Lehman, the socialist Mack Trucks worker running for president of the United Auto Workers. Reporters explained Lehman’s campaign to abolish the union bureaucracy and transfer power to workers on the shop floor, and the work of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unite workers internationally, independently of the union apparatus and both capitalist parties.

“I like it. I agree with it,” Respek said.

Organizing across borders

When asked whether truckers in the United States, Mexico and Canada should conduct a common struggle, Respek replied, “Yeah, definitely. We’ll be so powerful if we could just organize, you know, worldwide.

“We will be more powerful than they are if we were able to organize across borders, you know, across oceans,” he said.

Reporters discussed the bureaucracy’s efforts to retain control over workers’ struggles and preserve its own privileges, while accepting job losses.

“They are the ‘labor lieutenants of capital,’” Respek responded.

“We depend heavily on China,” Respek said of the ports. “A lot of the imports that we receive comes from China. We export very little.

“If people aren’t purchasing things, then it is going to slow down our job and put our job under threat,” he said. “The tariff is bad for our industry as well. Very bad.”

Asked about the war on Iran and rising fuel prices, Respek said, “We don’t want any more foreign wars. We don’t want any more forever wars.” He added, “It’s not to benefit the American people, and it’s affecting the price of fuel.

“That would be great, if we could have that type of political power

in our country to stop the war in Iran and to stop the war in Ukraine as well,” he said.

Reporters pointed to United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain’s promotion of military production under the slogan of an “Arsenal of Democracy.”

“He’s advocating for the military-industrial complex to create jobs,” Respek replied.

Respek also opposed the US blockade of Cuba. “The entire world has been trying to convince the government, the US government, to just ... stop the blockade or the embargo,” he said. He described Washington’s “vendetta against Cuba ... for nationalizing a bunch of American businesses over there,” he said, adding, “Frankly, I think the US needs to move on.”

Class warfare and the Democratic Party

Respek invoked Warren Buffett’s well-known remarks on the existence of class warfare in 2006, paraphrasing them as: “There is class warfare happening, and the bourgeoisie is winning, and the proletariat is losing.

“The Democrats and Republicans are just two sides of the same coin,” he said. “They both answer to the same masters, the same puppeteers.” He named billionaires, such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg.

“The Democrats are not even left-wing, in my opinion. They’re not left-wing. They’re just a moderate version of the right wing.”

Asked about the Democratic Socialists of America’s strategy inside the Democratic Party, Respek said, “The DSA is trying to bore from within,” adding that this would take “a heck of a long time” and “a lot of money.” Reporters argued that the strategy had already failed historically and that the DSA works to keep workers inside the Democratic Party, against the development of an independent socialist movement.

Asked what he understood socialism to mean, Respek replied, “I think of it as the workers owning the means of production collectively.” He added, “The mode of production is already socialized.

“I’m at the point where I’m accepting it,” he said of socialism. “The more I read about it, the more I keep working, the more it starts to resonate with me.”



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