

COMMERCE AT THE PORT OF SEATTLE SLOWED TO A TRICKLE, AND HASN'T PICKED UP SINCE

This week the truck drivers – who toil under the guise of false self-employment – are making it their job to sound the alarm on occupational hazards, overweight containers, shoddy equipment, risks to motorists, and the culprits responsible for these rampant safety violations: their employers and their giant retail shipper clients like Wal-Mart, Sears, and Target.

The trucking bosses at Pacer, Seattle Freight, Western Ports and others were stunned, but the state troopers weren't. Washington's top cops testified before lawmakers right alongside the workers, detailing a dizzying array of dangers associated with the drayage industry: Chronic safety violations so serious that an investigative journalist discovered late last year that officers pulled 32% of rigs they inspected outside the terminals off the road -- double the rate for trucks throughout the state. When specially trained troopers conducted more thorough inspections in 2011, King 5 TV reported, 58% of Port of Seattle cargo vehicles were yanked.

If the drivers' collective action sent shockwaves throughout the shipping and trucking industry, then their demonstration equally uprooted a commonly held societal belief. During the Occupy Wall Street port shutdowns, activists and well-intentioned sympathizers debated whether the blockades would siphon wages from port workers – arguably one of the greatest symbols of the 99% -- or if it would suck profits from the 1%, such as the Seattle-based global terminal operator, Goldman Sachs' SSA Marine, and its trucking outfit, Shipper's Transport Express.

What their protest proves is that port drivers, as inside agitators, are very much willing to lose pay as a means to powerfully reveal the crushing economic forces that literally put their lives and livelihoods at risk. Even, and especially amidst a severe economic downturn. Their historical ability to self organize, unite, and seize opportunities to improve their working conditions is unfolding before our eyes. Hundreds more drivers have since joined the safety work stoppage, and some companies remain shut with too few workers to move the cargo.

As their trucks remain parked, they've asked allies and supporters to help amplify their voices by reposting this and spreading the word about why they flooded the legislative hearing room to standing room-only capacity. One by one, they ferociously spoke in favor of HB 2527, a bill to shift responsibility for fixing the hazards, paying fines, and correcting safety violations off their sweat-ridden backs, and onto the broad shoulders of the mega-rich corporate owners of the tools of the trade like chassis.

Semere Woldu, who has been hauling cargo at the Port of Seattle for 8 years, told the panel:

“Our work is extremely dangerous. So the safety laws are very important. Unfortunately though, we drivers are forced to pay for violations that we are not responsible for. We often get tickets or are cited for faulty equipment that we don't own. One time, my boss knew I had a heavy load. He told me to go by the scale early in the morning when it was closed to avoid having the load weighed.”

Others shared their fears for their personal safety and the lives of motorists. “Every day, I haul two or three loads that are overweight, possibly putting myself and others at risk,” said Aynalem Moba, a 14-year port veteran. “The truck could tip over. I'm afraid I might kill myself or someone else. Sometimes we're carrying hazardous materials, and we don't know it.”

Some explained the retaliation they face for blowing the whistle. They get banned from the terminals or are denied work by their dispatchers.

Some of the protestors have already been suspended for speaking out. That only sparked their co-workers to walk off the job in solidarity – and disgust. By Wednesday, these non-unionized men and women who are desperately seeking the protections that collective bargaining rights would provide were leafleting the terminals and the docks, positively engaging the dockworkers brothers and sisters at the longshoremen's union, vowing to stay united, keep fighting for their rights, and all of our safety.