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Straining under the load

FACES OF THE RECESSION



Diandra Jay Staff Photographer

Long Beach truck driver Rafael Rivera says the past year has been the most difficult in his nine years of hauling containers. With port cargo plummeting, Rivera says he's not finding enough work to meet expenses. He has already lost a car and worries he'll be evicted.

By Kristopher Hanson
Staff Writer

LONG BEACH— Being a truck driver has never been easy.

Grueling hours, time away from family and long-term exposure to engine fumes are hallmarks of the trade, and it's not unusual to find drivers working for weeks without a day off.

Still, trucking has always attracted a certain breed of men and women who enjoy the open road and the freedom to set one's own hours.

However, the romantic notion of trucking as depicted in such films as "Smokey and the Bandit" and "Over The Top" are far from the reality faced by many of the nearly 15,000 truckers hauling goods to and from local ports.

A severe downturn in the trade since late 2007 coupled with stringent environmental regulations requiring drivers and companies to purchase new, "clean" rigs have trimmed driver incomes to new

lows, according to interviews with several drivers.

One driver, Rafael Rivera, said the past year has been the worst in his nine years hauling containers in and out of Long Beach and Los Angeles waterfront marine terminals.

"Between payments for the new truck, insurance, fuel, taxes and the lack of work, I'm barely making it," Rivera said during a recent afternoon outside Toyota's terminal in Long Beach. "I'm working 18 hours a day, six days a week, and I still can't afford my bills. I don't know what's going to happen."

According to Rivera, his weekly expenses include a \$75 truck lease payment, \$400 for fuel, \$100 to insure his cargo and about \$60 in licensing and registration fees.

To make ends meet, he figures he needs at least 16 jobs – or loads – per week.

The problem is, work is scarce and competition is fierce. If he's not ready to go any hour of any day, the

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work will quickly be dispatched to another driver.

In Long Beach and Los Angeles, as in most West Coast port communities, drivers are contracted by middlemen trucking companies to haul goods for retailers whose shipments of TVs, clothing, furniture and other goods arrive daily via ship.

Jobs are doled out on a first-come, first-serve basis, so Rivera and most drivers arrive at the dispatch yard around 8 each morning to wait their turn. If nothing materializes by noon, he'll go for lunch and wait for the afternoon shifts to begin.

Lately, however, the majority of his jobs have come at night, meaning he sits around the truckyard most days from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., only to get a job that keeps him busy until 2 in the morning.

"It's a bad position, because if I'm not here, I miss my chance, and that's not something I can afford to do, especially now," said Rivera, who supports a wife and teenage son.

Like many drivers, Rivera seems exasperated by the decline in trade – which saw imports drop 25 percent in local ports year-over-year – and at the same time a responsibility to pay for a new truck.

He had a truck repossessed last month and is behind on rent. He expects an eviction notice any day.

"I went home a few weeks ago with a check for \$138, and that was for a

week's work," Rivera said. "There's no way I can continue like this."

Even before the downturn, the Port of Los Angeles attempted to alleviate harbor drivers' plight by requiring companies doing business on its property – which includes all marine terminals – to hire drivers and pay them hourly rates.

That way, drivers like Rivera wouldn't be forced to sit around all day waiting for a load only to go home with empty pockets when the dispatcher closed shop for the day.

The proposal would have also shifted truck purchase costs off drivers' backs and onto companies, which the port offered to help with subsidies of up to 80 percent of the purchase price of new, cleaner-burning rigs.

Instead, they were sued by a consortium of retailers and trucking companies, and after a series of rulings and appeals, were ordered to maintain the status quo for drivers pending a trial in federal court this December.

Meanwhile, drivers like Rivera remain in limbo – unable to stop working but unable to sustain their families under the circumstances.

"I feel like I'm caught in the middle of a big game between powerful interests," Rivera said. "I just want to work like any regular person, pay my bills on time and go home to my family at night."

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