

## **Protesting truckers seek safer work conditions**

### **PORT: Drivers say they are denied overtime pay and that some were fired after calling for new policies.**

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By Kristopher Hanson, Staff Writer

WILMINGTON - More than 60 truck drivers protested outside one of the harbor's largest trucking companies early Monday, alleging that the carrier fired several drivers who demanded safer working conditions.

Shortly before 8 a.m., the group marched on the D Street dispatch yard of Swift Transportation, demanding the company reinstate the drivers and end alleged harassment of others.

The group was joined by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who last year helped broker a deal that expanded Swift's local truck fleet with hundreds of low-emission trucks in return for millions in city-sponsored subsidies.

"To say I'm merely disappointed in this kind of alleged intimidation and exploitation would be an understatement," said Hahn, who represents the working-class neighborhood where Swift is located. "These drivers deserve better than to be laid off or fired for exercising their right to speak up."

The Phoenix-based company, which operates some 20,000 trucks in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, said it was reviewing the claims, but didn't want to comment specifically on the terminated drivers.

"As a matter of policy, we cannot and do not comment on employee separation," said Dave Berry, Swift's vice president.

Driver Anthony Herron claimed he was fired on Feb. 6 after speaking up for drivers who said they were being coerced to haul freight exceeding safe weight limits.

He also said drivers are routinely denied overtime pay.

“We spoke up because for one thing, we were concerned about guys working 15 hours in a day and that affecting their ability to safely operate their truck,” said Herron, who is now collecting unemployment after 15 years of driving trucks in the L.A. area.

Herron was among four drivers the group claims were terminated for bringing up similar concerns. They’ve since filed an unfair labor charge with the National Labor Relations Board.

The Port of Los Angeles said it was reviewing driver claims and would audit any company found violating the terms of its “Clean Trucks” agreements, which grant exclusive access to local marine terminals for companies with the cleanest fleets.

Long a minor operator here, Swift in recent months has grown into one of the harbor’s largest carriers after signing a deal with the L.A. port giving the company \$20,000 for each model-year 2007 or newer rig it puts into service locally.

The incentive program, which extends to several other trucking firms, was designed to accelerate the turnover of older, more-polluting trucks in a region long plagued by poor air quality.

Swift now operates some 600 new trucks in the area - the largest share of the 3,000 “clean” rigs participating in the L.A. port’s “Clean Trucks” program.

Swift and others are also benefitting from a port-sponsored rebate program giving the company \$10 for each container hauled by these new trucks.

In addition, port authorities in both Long Beach and Los Angeles are exempting Swift and other companies that purchased new trucks before Jan.15 from container fees. The fees total \$70 per 40-foot container.

“In my view, the fact that we’re subsidizing these businesses with millions of dollars should compel them to operate in a responsible way,” Hahn said.

To date, L.A. port authorities have paid out more than \$40 million in incentives to local trucking companies that include Swift, Knight Transportation, Cal Cartage and Southern Counties Express.

Long Beach adopted a different program providing subsidies and incentives primarily to independent contract drivers who agree to buy a new truck.

However, just 30 drivers have taken Long Beach up on the offer so far, said port spokesman Art Wong.