OPINION

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Congress must give port authority to help truckers

CHRISTINE CORDERO & ROME ALOISE
My Word

A THOUSAND truck drivers face unemployment in January when their rigs are banned from the Port of Oakland. The state is rightly enforcing new diesel truck emission standards, but these drivers can't afford the new trucks or upgrades needed to comply. The drivers are angry because they were misled about the availability of grants to pay the costs.

An economist hired by the Port of Oakland estimated it would cost $200 million to transition to a clean port truck fleet to meet 2010 and 2014 standards. But there was only $22 million in the grant fund. Eight hundred drivers received grants, but more than 1,200 applicants were turned down. Some drivers bought newer trucks, intending to retrofit them. Now they're stuck with debt on a truck that they won't even be able to drive next year.

Drivers have been staging protests at the port, City Hall and the state capitol. Some are demanding more funding. Others are asking for a deadline extension and there was talk of staging a work stoppage.

Understandably, the drivers are scared and frustrated. They're desperate. They wonder how they're going to support their families. Port drivers make poverty-level wages. Few have health benefits. Misclassified as independent contractors, they are ineligible for unemployment benefits. They have no safety net.

Make no mistake: These regulations are critical for improving air quality for residents, port drivers and other workers who are at great risk of contracting asthma, cancer and other diseases associated with diesel soot.

But it is a mistake to cast this problem as a conflict between the truck drivers struggling to protect their livelihoods versus government regulators protecting residents who want clean air for their kids to breathe.

Conspicuously absent in this debate is the role of the corporations that own and ship the goods. Companies like Walmart, Target and Home Depot reap huge profits from the services the port provides, yet no one is asking them to help pay to make the port a safe place for workers and the surrounding communities. Instead, taxpayers are being told that we have to subsidize these companies while they lobby with everything they've got to avoid paying their fair share.

The Port of Los Angeles recognized the dangers of the broken port trucking system and has enacted a comprehensive and sustainable Clean Truck Program, requiring port trucking companies to hire their drivers as employees and take responsibility for less polluting trucks. Instantly, 2,000 of the oldest, dirtiest rigs were taken off the road and nearly 6,000 clean-burning vehicles were put into service. The result was immediate significant air quality improvements.

But the American Trucking Association sued to stop this highly successful program. Fearing the high cost of legal defense when the Port of Oakland is financially strapped, the port decided to put real trucking reform on hold. Now we're stuck with toxic air to breathe.

That's why environmentalists, unions and community activists across the country are calling on Congress to update federal law to ensure that ports have the authority to set environmental, labor and community standards for port trucking. Once this happens, the industry must be required to pay for the new trucks needed to clean up the air and protect the public's health. It's time for the free ride to end.

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