

Vigil held for truck driver killed at port

MEMORIAL: A group mourning Pablo Antonio Garcia calls for safer work conditions for truck drivers.

By Kristopher Hanson, Staff Writer



Pablo Antonio Garcia's family members wife Eva, center, and children Pablo, 17, top left; Anthony, 10; and Nidia, 15 comfort one another at his vigil at the Port of Long Beach on Wednesday. (Steven Georges)



Members of the group gathered to remember Pablo Antonio Garcia on Wednesday hold signs calling for safer working conditions. Garcia was crushed to death when a forklift hit his truck. (Steven Georges)

LONG BEACH - Friends and family of a truck driver fatally crushed while working in the Port of Long Beach gathered Wednesday to demand better working conditions for harbor-area drivers.

Standing next to a candle-adorned shrine near the Pier A accident site, the group urged lawmakers to adopt comprehensive reforms, saying drivers are routinely exposed to life-threatening hazards that include collapsing cranes, wayward forklifts, substandard trucks and heavy pollution.

"Typically what we've seen when there's an accident or a death is that nobody does an investigation, and it's because most of these drivers are being (labeled) as independent contractors, which exempts them from most important workplace rules and regulations," said Ricardo Hidalgo, a Teamsters organizer who attended the memorial. "The laws being the way they are, there isn't a proper investigation unless someone is working for a company ... working as an employee. That needs to change."

The memorial at Berth A90 was near the spot where Pablo Antonio Garcia was killed Jan. 28 while standing outside his truck, awaiting delivery of a steel container from another area inside the terminal.

Investigators said Garcia was pinned between two truck chassis when a forklift driver struck his rig. He suffered massive internal injuries and died a short time later.

Because Garcia was an employee driver, the state's Division of Occupational Safety and Health is investigating the accident, which occurred inside the SSA Marine Terminal. Its report is expected next week.

Long Beach Police Detective David Lauro, who is also investigating, said Wednesday he expects to file charges with prosecutors within two weeks, although he declined to specify the severity of the charges.

Garcia's death was followed several days later by an accident on Pier J, where driver Felipe Curiel was nearly killed when a container fell on the cab of his truck.

Curiel, 42, had to be pulled from the vehicle by Long Beach Fire rescuers, who used chain saws and powerful tools known as the "Jaws of Life" to pry open his pancaked rig.

A 40-year-old father of three, Garcia had been active with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, helping organize fellow drivers at Long Beach-based Maritech Leasing in the months before his death.

The group negotiated a labor contract providing overtime pay, health care and death benefits - perks Garcia's young family is now drawing on to ensure their survival, friends said Wednesday.

"We must ensure these accidents are fully investigated so that all port truck drivers, regardless of employee classification, can work in a safer environment," said Jim Santangelo, a Teamsters executive from Southern California.

Garcia, of Los Angeles, leaves behind a wife and children Pablo, 17; Nidia, 15; and Anthony, 10.

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