

# The Seattle Times



## Port's short-haul truckers struggle to make living

*Truck drivers who serve Seattle's busy shipping port say they're losing patience with chronically low pay and poor working conditions*

By Mike Lindblom  
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Truck drivers who serve Seattle's busy shipping port say they're losing patience with chronically low pay and poor working conditions.

International container shipments are moved by about 1,400 short-haul trucks, most driven by immigrants who take them from waterfront docks to rail yards a mile away, to Tacoma or to warehouses around Kent.

Short haulers are a crucial link in the world supply chain, but often overlooked, even as their weather-beaten trucks queue on the waterfront and clog ramp ways to the West Seattle bridges.

For years, they've asked for better working conditions and higher paychecks — even hinting at going on strike.

On Thursday, 10 drivers took the stage at a larger labor-environmentalist rally outside the Westin Hotel, where hundreds of officials gathered for the American Association of Port Authorities convention. The drivers displayed a mock \$400,000 check to drivers from Port of Seattle CEO Tay Yoshitani, whose annual pay is close to that amount.

"We need help," said driver Yosef Bruke. "Nobody respects us. We are called names you don't want to hear in public. We are foreigners, but we're just trying to make a living like everybody else. We are the middleman. We demand respect."

A petition circulating among drivers demands a "family-sustaining wage," collective-bargaining rights, clean restrooms, pay for time wasted in traffic or at entry gates, and money to

afford the newer, cleaner trucks that the Port might require by 2015.

Individual earnings vary greatly, but a Port study in 2006 found the median take-home pay was \$28,500 for drivers, who reported working an average 11 hours a day. That's less than half the average value of a container load, according to studies cited by labor activists.

Most short-haul truckers are classified as independent owner-operators, though they are dispatched by various trucking companies. This model offers some freedom but also can pit unorganized drivers against each other.

### Grievances Aired

While the Port has tried to make trucks and vessels greener, the economics have changed little since three years ago, when 280 drivers gathered in a Georgetown banquet hall to air their grievances, and hinted at a strike that never occurred.

The industry has fended off Teamsters-instigated proposals to require that ports hire drivers as employees. That would add costs and wipe out small business, opponents say.

The Teamsters, born in the trucking industry, are in constant contact with Seattle drivers, with a researcher and a liaison who is fluent in English, Eritrean and Amharic.

"If they become Teamster members, fantastic. If they don't and wind up with better working conditions, that's fine too," says Heather Weiner, a Teamster organizer in Seattle. "But right now they have no negotiating power, so it's a race to the bottom."



*Trucker Zekarias Abebe and his colleagues gather on Harbor Island while waiting for Longshoremen to return from lunch and load more containers onto their trucks. During down time, talk turns to drivers' unhappiness with their working conditions.*

### Environmental goals

Seattle Port Commissioner Tom Albro said he's focused on environmental goals and would rather not meddle with driver employment.

"I don't personally believe that a government should be running smaller businesses out of business, in order to assist big businesses," Albro said.

The Port gave drivers \$5,000 toward replacing pre-1994 trucks with newer, cleaner-operating ones, but drivers complained that it wasn't enough, forcing them to take loans or get money from relatives.

The American Trucking Associations have opposed fees and rules passed by the Port of Los Angeles, now stalled in federal court. The group disputes the complaints about low earnings.

"Our members, we think the figure is more in the \$50,000 to \$60,000 range, net out. A lot of them will make over 100 grand," says Curtis Whalen, the ATA's intermodal director. "Even if it were \$28,000 to \$35,000, or whatever, you don't have to be a short-haul driver. You can run your own business, on one truck. If you don't want to do it, go do something else."



Trucks line up to take container shipments from waterfront docks to rail yards or warehouses.

## Early start

Just before 6 a.m., truck engines gurgle to life in alleys and side streets in Sodo, Georgetown and South Park, adding to the lowland mix of industrial and commuter smog.

About 100 other drivers fetch their trucks from a lot near Spokane Street, recently created by the Port to take pressure off the neighborhoods.

Truckers cluster in the shoulders and roadway outside the Seattle International Gateway or "SIG" yard that BNSF Railway operates next to Starbucks headquarters. Gates open at 7, when drivers can fetch an empty chassis to hook to the back of the cab. Latecomers can lose an hour in line — the first of many delays.

Next stop is a container terminal, where a Longshoreman in a giant picker machine grasps a container and loads it onto the chassis.

When the marine-cloud layer lines up a certain way, the emissions from even one or two passing trucks can make the lungs constrict while walking on Alaskan Way.

Truckers typically are paid \$40 to \$46 for each container they deliver. Rates haven't risen for a decade, said David Mendoza, a researcher with Puget Sound SAGE, a social-justice advocacy group.

Just before noon, drivers queue outside the docks to make one more pickup before the Longshoremen take a lunch break. Sometimes they don't get there in time, so dozens congregate on Harbor Island until the gates reopen at 1 p.m. Phrases like "slave labor" flow freely in their conversation.

"If you are a trucker here, you have no option. You just accept what they want

you to do," said Binyam Tesgaye, a 25-year-old driver. "You don't have retirement, you don't have medical.... We have so many frustrations."

He can earn about \$250 a day by moving six or seven loads through the rail yard — but much of that goes for fuel, maintenance, insurance or other expenses. On slow days, earnings can drop by half.

In the afternoon, the truck routes into the railyard's south gate, at South Horton Street, overlap with commuters.

Drivers protect their fragile rigs by slowing to 5 mph over train tracks. Arterials are worn to brick or dust. Some find shortcuts in the back roads.

The latest irritant to drivers is a Washington State Patrol crackdown on defective equipment.

Zekarias Abebe said a trooper stopped his truck for idling briefly over a train track near Spokane Street. And one of his tires was underinflated. Abebe got off with a warning — but said he lost two hours.

Port trucks have the worst rate of violations in the state, said Trooper Chris Hooper. One cause is the lack of money drivers have, he said.

"It's pretty cutthroat down there," he said.

## 'Price-sensitive' port

Port commissioners acknowledge that drivers earn a meager living, but resist calls to overhaul the system.

If shipping costs more in Seattle — or is even perceived as costlier — business will switch to other ports, they fear.

"Seattle is more price-sensitive than other ports," says Commission President Bill Bryant. "We are in more of a competitive dogfight with Vancouver and Prince Rupert."

Unlike Los Angeles, where most arriving goods are consumed in that

region, about 70 percent of Seattle imports go to the Midwest. So when the Panama Canal is widened in 2014, some worry that Asian ships will bypass Seattle for Louisiana or Texas.

"The working conditions of the drivers are abysmal," acknowledges Port Commissioner Gael Tarleton. "Like in any labor force, any market, there are groups who enter at the lowest level and ... . You know why we have immigrant drivers? It's the one thing they can do where they don't need to speak the language well."

Short-trip hauling makes up less than 1 percent of the cost of retail items, said Paul Marvy, researcher for Change to Win, a labor-union coalition. "If you paid every driver double, the cost of a pair of Nikes would go up a cent or two."

Tarleton has been thinking about gradual steps that might boost the drivers' bottom line.

For instance, a shared insurance pool — instead of paying what drivers say is an insurance deduction of up to \$125 a week from their checks — and higher fuel allowances when diesel prices spike. Tarleton said the Port is working with the African Chamber of Commerce, and the nonprofit Cascade Sierra Solutions, to provide banking and credit to obtain cleaner trucks.

Commissioner Rob Holland calls the situation an urgent human-rights issue.

Ideally drivers would work for companies that invest in newer trucks, he said. Efficiency would improve alongside pay, because there's no more incentive to have low-paid drivers wasting hours to enter the freight-yard gate. Cheaper natural-gas fuel would replace diesel. Big retailers such as Wal-Mart, J.C. Penney and Home Depot, who have announced a goal to make the supply chain greener, would seek Seattle, he hopes.

"There would be more of an incentive for people to work together."

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