

DIRTY DIESEL: ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

*Hailee Didio**

My name is Hailee Didio and I am a student at California State University Long Beach. I am in my last semester of college and have been a student intern for the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports (CCSP) since March of 2009. In this time I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about the connection between labor and the environment. The poor air quality in Long Beach, where I live and want to live for a long time in the future, is closely related to the working conditions that port truck drivers endure. This is because drivers are required to provide their own trucks—which cost tens of thousands of dollars—despite their small earnings. As a result, they drive old, diesel-fuel trucks that spew toxic and unhealthy fumes into the Long Beach air. My time with CCSP has shown me that without adequate protection for these drivers, it will be very difficult to clean up the air around the ports.

Port drivers are often classified as “independent contractors,” but in reality this is a misclassification. Port truck drivers actually act as employees for the trucking companies, but because of their status as contractors, they are stripped of the protections that typical employees are granted. For example, truck drivers are not paid by the hour, they do not receive health insurance, they have no health

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and safety protections, and their take-home pay at the end of the week is typically very little. Furthermore, the trucks that these workers are driving are powered by highly-polluting diesel fuel. In order to protect the health of drivers and Long Beach residents from fumes which are linked to cancer and asthma, there is a need to switch to trucks that run on more environmentally-friendly fuel. But who will pay for new trucks with cleaner technology? Right now, since truck drivers are classified as independent contractors and own their vehicles, they are the ones who will be forced to purchase new trucks despite the fact that trucks typically cost up to \$200,000 and the average truck driver only makes about \$28,000 a year. In order to meet these challenges, CCSP believes that truck drivers should be re-classified as employees so that they could win better working conditions, and that the truck companies themselves should provide new trucks for the drivers.

During the course of my internship, I have had the opportunity to go out to the ports and meet some of the drivers. I met Manny, around forty years old, who told me that he was losing his house and was worried about how he was going to take care of his daughter. I also met a driver whose wife was sick and could not afford treatment because neither one of them had health insurance. Another thing I noticed during my time at the ports was the physical condition of the drivers' trucks. Many of the tires on the trucks were badly worn and I thought, "Are these trucks even safe to be driving?" And then it dawned on me—the drivers probably can't even afford to buy new tires! With earnings that average six to ten dollars an hour, how could they afford to replace all ten tires on each truck?

After meeting the drivers, I wanted to learn more so I volunteered to help out the research team at CCSP. The Coalition put me in charge of reviewing driver paychecks and manifests, which are the equivalent of timesheets for drivers. The primary difference between timesheets and manifests is that drivers are not paid for their time; they are paid by the load. Drivers record their hours in their manifests, but the main purpose of manifests is to record how many loads of goods they transport each day from one location to another. Because drivers get paid by how many loads they transport, they tend to work very long hours in order to keep food on their families' tables. When looking over the manifests, I noticed that drivers worked about twelve hours per day on average and sometimes put in days as long as fourteen and fifteen hours. Oftentimes drivers started

work very early in the morning (four or five a.m.) or worked very late into the night (until two or three a.m.). Driving for such long periods of time is clearly unsafe; however, this is how port truck drivers make ends meet—and even that is sometimes not enough.

In addition to reviewing the manifests, I also had the opportunity to review drivers' weekly paychecks. The paychecks are very interesting because there is such an extreme difference between net and gross income. When I saw the gross income I thought, "Well this isn't so bad—this is decent pay." But as I looked at the average take-home pay, I saw a different story. As independent contractors, drivers are taxed in many ways. They are also forced to pay for their own fuel, parking fees, truck insurance, and more. By the end of the week, drivers are often left with barely enough for survival. One driver had a gross pay of over \$1,000 but his take-home pay, after expenses, was only \$87 for a week's work. In addition, take home pay fluctuates a great deal from week to week. These stories and others are what really motivated me to continue working with CCSP. The very idea that these individuals had to pay for and maintain a new truck seemed out of the question for me, and I knew I had to do all I could to help the drivers out.

By the time summer was over and the fall semester came around, I was fed up with everything I had seen and all that I had learned. It was time to spread the word and do something about it, so I started a campus organization called Students United 4 Justice (SU4J). SU4J started off with only me and four other members. We were a tiny group with big dreams. We were determined to spread the word about the working conditions of port truck drivers and the implications these conditions have on the environment. The goal of SU4J is to create a base of students who understand and care about these problems and then address these problems through participation in city politics, attending community meetings, conducting research projects, and organizing marches and rallies. As a result of our efforts, angry students have attended various city hall meetings to voice their concerns about whether or not the current trucking system is sustainable and whether it will allow for us to clean up our air. At the community meetings, we have heard heartbreaking stories of Long Beach residents whose children have asthma and local families with no health insurance. We even met a family who moved out of Long Beach when the mother became pregnant, because they were scared to raise a child in a city where

one in eight children has asthma. We also learned that the neighborhoods in West Long Beach are referred to as “diesel death zones” and that children living in these areas are not able to play outdoors because of the effects on their respiratory systems.

In the two semesters that SU4J has been around, the club has grown from a tiny campus group to a much larger, more involved organization. SU4J currently has over 150 members, including students, faculty, and honorary community members. This semester the students of SU4J are actively working to expose the trucking industry and other industries like it. In May we will be holding Corporate Corruption Week which will consist of three days of films and demonstrations highlighting human rights violations committed by large corporations at the local, national, and global level. As we continue to research and learn more about the problems surrounding our schools and communities, we will also continue to come up with new strategies and plans of action to counteract these problems. SU4J is dedicated to this crisis and will not stop until a more livable Long Beach is created.

Long Beach is a beautiful place, with lots of fun things to do. However, if things do not change, I know that I could not, in good conscience, raise a family here. I could never subject my children to the poor air quality of Long Beach and risk them growing up with respiratory problems. The way I see it, if industry does not take responsibility for the pollution it has created by purchasing and maintaining new alternative fuel trucks, Long Beach will forever be the home of poor air quality and “diesel death zones.” That’s why the environmental and labor movements must get together. Only when drivers are empowered to organize and fight to gain employee status can the air get cleaned up. Only then will the people with the money—the trucking companies—be forced to take responsibility for the environmental damage their businesses cause. At the same time, the workers will also be able to demand better wages and working conditions. As a result of these changes, a more sustainable system will be created and Long Beach residents will breathe cleaner air. Movements like CCSP are vital to the livelihood of our communities because they speak for the people against the harm caused by unregulated industry and unchallenged authority.