

## 'Sweatshop on Wheels'; Overworked truckers put us all in the danger zone

JOHN BENDEL; Bendel is a senior editor at Newport Communications, which publishes several trucking magazines.

AT the core of our prosperity lies trouble. It's in the business of trucking - a vast, turbulent world all around us, yet just out of sight.

We see big trucks on the highway but not the people in them. Somehow, trucks and truckers are too ordinary for serious coverage - the kind of attention we lavish on IPOs and the Internet.

Of course abused, exhausted drivers of 80,000-pound trucks have accidents, and that means human misery. Just ask such groups as Parents Against Tired Truckers of Lisbon Falls, Maine. They'll tell you what happens when truckers drive too fast and for too many hours just to earn something close to minimum wage. They'll also tell you how hard it is to get anyone to pay attention.

It's all in front of us, but we don't see: interstates all but overwhelmed with long-haul trucks, rest areas so crowded that fatigued truck drivers often have no place even to pull over. When they do, some leave behind Zip-lock bags of urine they fill saving time on the road. Many contend with long-distance crises that ultimately break up their families.

Conditions are so poor and the pay system so unfair that long-haul companies compete with the fast-food industry for workers. Most long-haul carriers experience 100 percent annual driver turnover. Fed-up drivers walk off the job so regularly that dispatchers keep packed suitcases in the office; they never know when they'll have to

hop a plane for the next abandoned truck.

Driver recruitment has become an industry in itself. What does that mean out on the interstates? For one thing, it means drivers of the biggest, heaviest trucks on the highways, drawn from the bottom of the labor pool as it is, are often rookies besides.

What is government doing about it? In response to rising safety concerns, Congress created a new Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to promulgate new rules, get tough on old ones and generally improve the negative atmosphere that encourages good people to look elsewhere for employment.

What are long-haul employers doing about it? The Truckload Carriers Association of Alexandria, Va., wants permission to import drivers from poor nations; it wants 18-year-olds allowed to drive big trucks in interstate commerce. Trucking lobbyists want anything, in fact, but the kind of economic reform trucking needs.

The case for reform is made exhaustively in a new book called *Sweatshop on Wheels: Winners and Losers in Deregulation*, by Michael Belzer of the University of Michigan School of Business. Belzer, a former truck driver, writes that competition is so fierce among deregulated motor carriers that "they do not have the power to raise wages substantially because they are caught in a race to the bottom."

The place to start is with the present exemption of trucking from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which compels most employers to pay time-and-a-half for overtime. That

abused exemption allows carriers to pay drivers by the mile - a clear and unforgivable incentive to drive too fast and for too many hours. Mileage pay means drivers, not carriers or shippers, absorb virtually all the costs of trucking delays.

Unpaid driver labor underlies a grossly inefficient system that keeps drivers idle - loading, unloading or simply waiting - for up to 40 hours a week, according to the industry's own studies. Not enough driving hours are left for drivers to earn a living and stay within the law.

So many drivers falsify log books to create on paper the hours they need to drive and earn a living. As long as drivers earn nothing for their time, industry has no incentive to improve shipping procedures, and drivers have no incentive to accurately record working hours.

This labor issue takes on a special urgency where it meets public safety. More than 5,000 people, including many truck drivers, lose their lives in trucking accidents every year. The low rates that come from unfair driver pay only attract more freight to the carriers whose trucks are overwhelming our highways already.

GRAPHIC: Photo: An overturned truck on Highway 290 at Pinemont had to be lifted with airbags to be towed recently. The driver fell asleep at the wheel and told police he awoke to find the rig overturned.; Houston Chronicle file

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