

Worldwide Protests by Truckers Spread into the United States

by Marianna Wertz

The trucker demonstrations and port blockages which erupted a month ago in France as protests against soaring diesel and gasoline prices, have spread worldwide, including into the United States, becoming a rebellion against economic globalization. All over the world on Oct. 4, professional drivers protested the rising fuel prices, overwork without pay, and long hours that are destroying the lives and livelihoods of independent truckers.

The International Transport Workers Federation estimates that a quarter of a million truckers in 70 countries took part in protests. In addition to the intensifying truck blockades in most of western Europe, the rallies took place in Bangladesh, Mongolia, Thailand, Norway, Japan, Indonesia, India, and the United Kingdom.

In America, the protest was organized by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters at 16 port sites. The key demands of the protesters were for 100% of fuel surcharges attached to shipping customers' bills to defray the cost of diesel prices, to be paid directly to the drivers; higher wages; and fewer unpaid hours. Port drivers can spend as many as 20 to 30 hours each week in lines, waiting to pick up cargo.

The political problem with the mobilization, however, is evident in the statement put out by Teamsters General President James P. Hoffa, who said, "We commend the Clinton-Gore Administration for the release of emergency oil reserves to help lower the price of diesel. But this must be more than a one-time fix. Oil reserves should be used as an ongoing mechanism to help stabilize the price of diesel fuel, just as [Federal Reserve Chairman] Alan Greenspan uses interest rates to stabilize inflation."

While trying to show some leadership in protesting the fuel crisis, Hoffa is bowing to the very interests, in Greenspan and Gore, who created the crisis in the first place.

'Turn Up the Heat'

The LaRouche political movement hit several of these demonstrations with literature and LaRouche's call for nation-to-nation arrangements to shut down the speculators who are driving up the cost of fuel (the call is published elsewhere in this issue); in several locations, they joined in the rally as well.

Here are reports from several of the local demonstration leaders:

In Hampton Roads/Norfolk, Virginia, Mark Lusk said that the demonstrators put out about 50 trucks, driving in a convoy in circles around the port. This demonstration, Lusk said, "is like the low heat on the stove. If we can't get their attention, we'll just turn up the heat the next time."

In Boston, Massachusetts, Colleen Brady reported about 25 protesters had a rally at Conley Terminal in South Boston, leafletting the truckers as they came in and left the port with their freight. Their leaflet said, "It's an international day of protest. Throughout the world, truck drivers and their unions have chosen Oct. 4 to say it's time for a change. Steamship lines argue the solution for port drivers is to keep terminal gates open 24/7. Drivers and their unions know that fatigue kills. Port drivers work so many hours, many for no pay, that they would often do better working at Mc-



The Teamsters' picket line in Charleston, South Carolina, during the international day of action on Oct. 5.

Donalds. They need shorter hours, not longer; more pay, not less, and pay for all the hours worked. What we're really calling for is a fuel surcharge to compensate for the skyrocketing diesel fuel prices. We need the port authorities to guarantee that the companies pass along 100% of the fuel surcharge to the truck drivers who pay the bill."

In Charleston, South Carolina, Robert Bates estimated that there were 150-200 people at three different gates. "This is just a warning of what's to come," he said. "If they don't straighten it out and the government doesn't get involved, all the way to the President, then they're going to see a collapse of the whole thing, a collapse of the country, because everything moves, just about, on the independent trucker's back."

Tony Fernandes in Jacksonville, Florida said, "I'd say we got 85-90% of the truckers that are protesting out of the port of Jacksonville. I'd say you got a couple of hundred. We've got to do something, the guys are in big trouble and this is the only way hopefully to get the attention and to get somebody to do something. We just turned our trucks off, sitting on the side of the road to the entrance to the port, waving our signs and eating our dinner."

In New Orleans, Louisiana, Teamsters Local 270 President George Westley said, "We had great participation. We marched on the Port of New Orleans. We had about 350 people in attendance at this rally. We had media coverage. We went down and I went in to see the director of the port. I gave him the Truckers Bill of Rights. Also accompanying me was the president of the local ILA [International Longshoremen's Association], who has an interest at this port also.

"The bread-and-butter issues were fuel, low wages, working for nothing—which is tantamount to slavery. By working for nothing, I mean they've got them there waiting in line at their disposal. They got the grievances aired out today and I guess we're waiting now to see the results of what we did. I think they were somewhat surprised at our numbers and they complimented us on the orderly way in which we handled it. My response to that is, we can do things in a professional and orderly manner, but we also want our problems addressed."

At the two biggest ports on the West Coast, Oakland and Long Beach, California, demonstrations had been held Sept. 26, shutting down the two ports for that day. Odus Hall of Oakland said that, since they had already demonstrated on the 26th, they went ahead with informational picketing on Oct. 4 instead of a big rally. Hall said, "We're going to continue to organize these port drivers and to assist them in any way that we can. Our intent is to bring about the unionization of them."

In Houston, Texas and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 50-60 truckers demonstrated, doing a slow convoy on the highway in Houston, and demonstrating at the Tioga Pier in Philadelphia.

All these demonstrations are a good start in what can be expected to be a growing strike/protest wave across the nation, as the full effects of hyperinflation and the collapse of financial institutions begin to be felt.

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