

Los Angeles, Long Beach port truckers vote to unionize at Carson company

By Karen Robes Meeks, Long Beach Press Telegram

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Union truck drivers, right, show happiness with the agreement with Shippers Transport Express to employ union truck drivers rather than use independent contractors. Press conference at Banning's Landing, Wilmington. Jan. 9, 2015. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

Los Angeles and Long Beach port truck drivers at a Carson trucking company are now

part of a union.

Nearly 80 percent of 111 drivers from Shippers Transport Express voted Friday to be represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, paving the way for the union to negotiate the drivers' first contract.

With the Port of Los Angeles^[1] as their backdrop, drivers and union, city and community leaders celebrated the results of the election in a press conference at Banning's Landing Community Center in Wilmington.

"What a great day for labor," said Fred Potter, International Vice President-At Large for the Teamsters. "This has been possible because of the courage of these drivers."

Potter and others also applauded Shippers Transport Express^[2], which agreed to move from an independent contractor business model to an employee-based drayage business starting Jan. 1. Proponents called it a major victory for pro-union truck drivers who felt that trucking companies used the independent contractor model as a way to skimp on wages and skirt labor laws.

"It's about Shippers, who have done something that other trucking companies are unwilling to do in Los Angeles, and that's to face the reality that misclassification is the wrong direction for employees and it's the wrong direction for the future of this port," he said.

Shippers Transport's General Manager Kevin Baddeley said after the press conference that his company was compelled by a court decision to move to an employee-based business model, but also asserted that other trucking firms may follow suit.

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"This is the future of the industry, I think," Baddeley said. "I think we're just the first. I'm OK with it. It's what the drivers want."

This comes after months of talks between drivers and Shippers Transport that led to a newly-struck contract that would allow drivers to unionize.

Leonardo Mejia, a Shippers driver for about four years, has been seeing the same issues as a driver at the ports for 15 years.

“No matter where I have worked in this industry, the problems are the same everywhere in every company — no respect, no dignity, bad pay. ... These problems are getting worse every day for the drivers. For me, now those days are over. ... To be part of the union, it means respect and the most important thing to me is to have a voice in the workplace.”

This is the latest in an ongoing effort by area port truck drivers and their supporters to raise concerns about the need for better pay and working conditions at area trucking companies. Job actions by drivers have included filing wage theft claims^[3] against other firms and organizing strikes at marine terminals throughout the Harbor Area. Shippers Transport was not one of the eight trucking companies that were picketed.

A report released by advocacy groups^[4] recently asserted that two-thirds of the nation’s truck drivers who haul goods from U.S. seaports, including the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, are misclassified as independent contractors.

But opponents counter that most truck drivers want to remain independent contractors for the flexibility and the ability to own their own trucks and their own small businesses.

With the help of Mayor Eric Garcetti and Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Gene Seroka, the Teamsters and the eight trucking companies have since called a truce on strikes^[5] and have been engaged in confidential negotiations. Organizers would not further comment on those talks Friday.

Julie Gutman-Dickinson, an attorney representing the truck drivers, called the Shippers’ move to an employee-based model a historic agreement that will serve as a model for other companies.

“I believe other companies will follow to avoid huge legal liability from their unlawful ‘independent contractor model’ and to avoid strikes and debilitating labor disruption,” she said. “Many companies are starting to recognize that it is through modernizing to adopt an employee model, a neutral unionization process and working collaboratively with drivers, the Teamsters and the port, that they will be able to move cargo more efficiently and effectively, stay in business and thrive.”

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Links

1. <http://www.presstelegram.com/business/20150109/portoflosangeles.org>
2. <http://www.shipperstransport.com/>
3. <http://www.presstelegram.com/business/20141015/judge-orders-trucking-firm-to-reinstate-two-fired-port-drivers>
4. <http://www.presstelegram.com/business/20140219/most-us-port-truck-drivers-are-misclassified-as-independent-contractors-according-to-new-report>
5. <http://www.presstelegram.com/general-news/20141121/los-angeles-long-beach-port-truck-drivers-end-eight-day-strike>

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