

Los Angeles Times

Labor, environmentalists unusual allies;

Ports' Clean Trucks program has union leaders talking 'green,' but some truckers want to put on the brakes.

Evelyn Larrubia, November 27, 2008

"If we are to prosper as a nation," Teamsters head James Hoffa Jr., told union members in Oakland in July, "our future lies in a green economy."

That might seem like an unusual declaration for a union leader. But then, Hoffa went a step further in announcing that Teamsters was abandoning its push for oil drilling in the Arctic.

Environmental activists and union bosses are known for their rancor. They have historically held opposite positions on key issues -- drilling in fragile environments, nuclear power, logging ancient forests -- pitting jobs against the environment.

But that was before the values of the environmental movement were adopted by mainstream society, before union membership began to plunge and manufacturing jobs were exported overseas.

"In the old days when labor had more power, they didn't need . . . to bother with other organizations," said Ruth Milkman, a sociology professor and labor expert with UCLA. "Now they're struggling to survive and they're fighting to rebuild."

Los Angeles is at the forefront of this trend, turning a concept into an actual project at the region's two ports: the newly minted Clean Trucks program, which is being watched as a possible model for other cities.

Environmentalists had for years sought to reduce the cancer-causing pollution coming from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach -- the source of a quarter of the smog in the Los Angeles basin. They made large strides cleaning up the ships, but reducing the tons of diesel emissions spewed by the port's notoriously aged truck fleet was proving a tougher nut to crack.

At the same time, various unions had tried to organize drivers at the port, who they say make about \$30,000 a year as independent contractors without time off,

health insurance or other benefits. There were strikes and protests, but no union ever formed.

The truckers didn't legally work for anybody. Shipping companies act as middlemen between the shippers and the truckers, who own their trucks.

In 2006, labor leaders say they approached environmentalists with a deal that would make both their goals possible: truckers had to become employees of firms, which could be petitioned for higher wages and benefits and required to buy cleaner trucks and held to maintenance standards.

"That was a game-changer," said Todd Campbell, former policy director for the Coalition for Clean Air and still a board member.

The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a nonprofit closely tied to the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, brought together the Teamsters and Unite Here with the National Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club and the Coalition for Clean Air. It also pulled in neighbors, community groups, advocates for asthma sufferers and the NAACP, ultimately building a coalition of 50 groups.

"The labor movement brought more political capital to the table," said Madeline Janis, head of LAANE. "But the environmental movement brought a lot of political credibility to the table."

It didn't hurt that Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa had promised to clean up the ports during his campaign and that the mayor appoints the harbor commissioners. Janis is one of his closest allies.

The Clean Trucks program, which went into effect last month, will reduce cancer-causing diesel pollution by banning older trucks. In five years diesel trucks must meet 2007 clean-air standards to pick up cargo at both ports. And in 2012, trucking companies will be required, through concessionaire agreements, to employ all of their truckers to work at the port of Los Angeles.

The trucking companies and the shippers have filed legal challenges against the plan both in the courts and at the Federal Maritime Commission in Washington, D.C. They contend that it violates federal law to require trucking companies to be concessionaires to work at the port.

Curtis Whalen of the American Trucking Assn. said the employee requirement is unnecessary to clean the air because the truckers can be required to provide maintenance as part of the financing of the new trucks.

He also accuses the Teamsters of understating the port truckers' average income by more than \$10,000 a year.

“It’s a very strange alliance,” Whalen said. “Unfortunately, I think the environmental and health community has been hoodwinked on this.” If the plan survives the legal challenges, clean-air and labor activists in other cities across the nation would try to follow suit, several labor and environmental advocates said. If the coalition remains close, the groups could work together on other local issues.

But already problems have arisen. Long Beach officials balked at the concession requirement, so trucking companies won’t have to use employee-drivers there.

Some truckers are unhappy that Los Angeles gave companies five years to move to employee-drivers.

“With the salaries they’re offering, it’s hard for us to get too excited. Some are paying \$14 an hour, others \$15. The pay is too low,” said Max Palma, 46, a Salvadoran immigrant who has been a trucker at the ports for 25 years. Likewise, environmentalists are disappointed that incentives for new trucks are going mostly to new diesel engines, undermining the goal to convert half the port fleet to zero-emission alternative-fuel vehicles.

Of the 330 applications for the subsidies (financed with state bond and port fees), only 90 were for alternative-fuel trucks, which are more expensive.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District, Coalition for Clean Air and others have signed letters asking port officials to improve the subsidy program.

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