

La Opinión

From the port, a cry for help

Drivers demand respect and dignified working conditions

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"We want to be treated with respect and dignity," says Jimmy Martínez, a port driver from Los Angeles who has been fighting for a year to win labor rights that shouldn't be taken for granted in the most powerful country on earth, such as access to clean bathrooms, potable water and a place to eat.

Each night, Martinez and his coworkers, employees of the transportation company Toll Group, are obliged to use portable toilets that, they say, are generally in disrepair. They are unable to use the office kitchen, because it is closed outside of normal business hours.

These deficiencies have led the drivers to attempt to organize themselves into a union, an effort that has been met with hostility on the part of the company, according to the drivers. The drivers told La Opinión that the company has sought to put the breaks on their movement by means of alleged unjustified punishments and stricter rules.

"There is more punishment than ever before for just about anything," said Martínez, a Honduran who has driven drayage trucks in the port for 13 years. The past two years, during which he has been employed by Toll

Group, have been the worst, he insists. "For a year we have been organizing because we don't have access to restrooms and we suffer from the abuse of dispatchers, supervisors and bosses," he said.

Toll Group, which handles local transportation for major fashion labels, did not respond to telephone calls and emails sent by this newspaper. According to financial documents published on its website, the company, headquartered in Australia, finished last year with sales of 8.225 million dollars, an 18.4% increase over the previous year.

Port drivers have been fighting on different fronts for years to form a union in order to protect their labor rights.

Salaries and benefits have been their biggest worry. Although the drivers have achieved, through Los Angeles's Clean and Safe Trucks program, recognition by some transportation companies as employees rather than independent operators, this has not been enough.

"They have been unjustly mistreated," said William Connor, priest of St. Joseph Church in Long Beach, referring to the alleged practices by companies to keep the drivers from forming a union.



Rights like the access to clean restrooms and running water, and a place to eat are some of the reclamations made by port drivers to Toll.

In the case of the Toll Group drivers, said Father Connor, the type of demands being made seem more fitting of a third world country. "They don't have a decent place to eat," he said.

Father Connor emphasized that the drivers' current working conditions are "terrible" and that he considers them "morally wrong."

Karael Vallecillos, a driver with eleven years of experience, says that his only desire is for recognition of his work and its fundamental importance to the economy of the region, and the entire country.

"We aren't second class citizens, we're first class drivers. We work long days, far from our families, in a dangerous industry," he emphasized.