



The International Brotherhood of Teamsters

**Testimony before the
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure's
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit**

U.S. House of Representatives

**Testimony of Lamont Byrd
Director of Safety and Health
International Brotherhood of Teamsters**

On

“On the Front Lines: The Impacts of COVID-19 on Transportation Workers”

June 9, 2020

**International Brotherhood of Teamsters
25 Louisiana Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001**

Introduction

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee, my name is Lamont Byrd, Director of Safety and Health for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Thank you for inviting me here today to testify about the impact of COVID-19 on transportation workers.

The Teamsters Union represents over 600K commercial drivers and other transportation workers who load/unload/handle and transport goods that are critical to supporting this nation's supply chains. The majority of our transportation sector workers are classified as essential employees, including those who transport groceries, medical supplies, and general freight from our food processing and manufacturing facilities, and ports. Our membership also includes over 250 thousand UPS workers who, as a result of the pandemic are processing and delivering extraordinary numbers of packages to homes as a result of a dramatic increase in online shopping. We also represent solid and medical waste workers who are an oftentimes overlooked group of transportation workers who are especially key to during this pandemic as they support our efforts to maintain this nation's public health and sanitation.

Transportation workers are at unprecedented health risk, yet they perform essential services 24 hours each day, 7 days each week. They deliver goods and perform their jobs regardless of whether that geographic area has been designated as a COVID-19 "hot spot". In many instances, they perform this critically important work without having been provided with the necessary personal protective equipment and safety supplies to protect themselves.

An example I would like to share with you is the work that drivers and dockworkers from the Yellow and Roadway companies recently did for a nationwide retailer of essential goods. In a highly coordinated, time-sensitive move, Teamster drivers delivered plexiglass safety shields to more than 1,500 retail locations so the workers in those stores could operate safely, thus ensuring their communities had the goods they needed.

Impact on Transportation Workers and Motor Carriers

Teamster Union representatives report that some sectors of the trucking industry have experienced a veritable explosion in freight volume that surpasses what is normally seen during peak volume seasons. Consequently, drivers in those sectors are frequently being pressured to work longer hours and deliver more freight; and doing so without the staffing support that they normally receive during peak freight seasons.

Other sectors of the industry are experiencing a steep decline in volume and revenue as some state governments issue “stay at home” orders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drivers in those sectors are working fewer hours, delivering less freight, experiencing reductions in compensation, and in some cases have been laid off.

Motor carriers report that they are incurring increased operational costs and challenges at a time when the nation is depending on our truck driver members to make around the clock deliveries. Management representatives from those motor carriers suggest that the increased

operational costs are a direct result of providing personal protective equipment (PPE); implementing enhanced cleaning and disinfection protocols; and delays at shipper's businesses.

Drivers report that there continue to be shortages of PPE and safety supplies available to them. Some motor carriers are not consistently complying with CDC guidelines concerning routine cleaning and disinfecting shared vehicles and tools; not enforcing policies requiring maintaining physical distancing and providing PPE and other safety supplies. Teamster locals have had to pick up the slack, making masks for our members, or even producing and distributing massive quantities of hand sanitizer for our drivers to use on the job.

Teamster drivers also report experiencing difficulty accessing food, toilet, and handwashing facilities while on the road as a result of businesses being closed or having policies that restrict visitors from using the facilities.

Impact on Driver Health and Safety

Commercial drivers not only have a significant role in ensuring that this nation has stable, operational supply chains, according to researchers who submitted a recent journal article¹, they may be key workers relative to acquiring and transmitting the virus such as SARS CoV-2, which causes Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). This virus is spread from person-to-person, and there are factors associated with commercial drivers that place them at increased risk of becoming infected and spreading the virus. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), reported that truck

¹ "A novel COVID-19 based truck syndemic? Implications for public health, safety, and vital supply chains". MK Lemke, PhD, et. Al, American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 2020.

drivers traveled over 180 billion miles in 2018². They traveled to virtually every corner of the United States. Due to the nature of their work, they come into contact with a wide range of individuals, including, but not limited to customers, coworkers, and members of the general public. Drivers also have social contacts both at home and on the road.

Several studies are concluding that truck drivers are likely to have a higher rate of medical conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension.³ Studies also show that tobacco use tends to be more prevalent among this group of workers⁴ and they tend to work longer hours than most other workers. These factors combined suggest that truck drivers may be at increased risk of exposure to SARS CoV-2; experience more severe health outcomes should they develop COVID-19, and may spread the disease as they travel.

As they see their coworkers and other individuals become ill and even die, many of our driver-members express concerns about becoming occupationally exposed, ill, and spreading the infection.

What is needed?

Commercial drivers not only have a significant role in ensuring that this nation has stable, operational supply chains, but researchers also suggest that drivers may be key workers relative to acquiring and transmitting viruses that are spread from person-to-person, such as SARS CoV-2.

² <https://www.bts.gov/content/us-vehicle-miles>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6237367/>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1945044/>

Commercial drivers travel to all corners of the United States and they can interact with a large number of people, including customers, social contacts, and the general public.

Studies show that drivers are likely to have a higher rate of medical conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension; and have a high rate of tobacco use. These factors combined suggest that truck drivers may be at increased risk of exposure to SARS CoV-2; experience more severe health outcomes should they develop COVID-19, and may spread the disease as they travel. Truck drivers and all transportation workers need forceful, science-based health and safety regulations and regulatory agencies need the funding, staffing, and authority to enforce those regulations to ensure that they and the critical supply chains they support are protected. They also need strong legislation put in place to protect their health and safety and ensure that their employers can manage the economic challenges that they face as a result of the pandemic.

To that end, Senators Cantwell, Markey, and Blumenthal recently introduced the Essential Transportation Employee Safety Act of 2020. This bill would, among other things, compel trucking companies to clean, disinfect, and sanitize their trucks in accordance with CDC guidance. It would also assist drivers in getting PPE and priority testing in case of exposure. The International Union strongly supports this legislation and encourages it to be passed into law.

We also need OSHA to issue an emergency temporary standard on airborne infectious disease. The Every Worker Protection Act (H.R. 6559) introduced by Congressman Scott in the House and Senator Baldwin in the Senate would require this standard get done. Drivers are at a high risk of exposure when they stop to make a delivery at a warehouse, factory, or other worksites.

Making sure the people they interact with during these deliveries are in turn covered by an OSHA standard will go far in helping to keep truck drivers safe on the job.

Drivers also need their employers to be able to weather these troubling times economically. In the passage of the CARES Act, Congress foresaw the challenges that many essential businesses such as trucking companies would encounter when operating in a pandemic environment. It is just as important that small and large trucking companies have access to resources made available under the CARES Act. When the economic recovery begins, retailers, manufacturers, and businesses will be counting on motor carriers, large and small to transport their goods. We need them, and their drivers, ready to answer this call, and not rebuilding in the wake of this crippling economic downturn.

On the regulatory front, we are concerned that there are efforts to weaken regulations that should be protective of transportation workers. The FMCSA recently revised the Hours of Service Regulations for commercial drivers by:

- Increasing the daily work hours for short-haul drivers from 12 hours each day to 14 hours and expanding the driving window from 12 to 14 hours
- Requiring drivers to take a “rest” break after 8 hours of continuous driving. This is a significant departure from the previous rule that required drivers to take a rest break within the first 8 hours of coming on duty.
- Defining “rest period” as any time period during which a driver is not operating a commercial motor vehicle. This “rest” period time includes off duty time, or on-duty, not driving time (during which a driver may perform non-driving job tasks such as loading or

unloading a truck, or manually delivering goods). The previous rule required drivers to be off duty during the “rest” period.

The regulatory revision occurred while commercial drivers who are involved in the transportation of goods in response to the pandemic are operating under “suspended” hours of service regulations, which allows drivers to drive and work an unrestricted number of hours on a daily and weekly basis. We commented on this regulatory revision and expressed our concerns that the revisions will not mitigate driver fatigue or improve transportation safety. There is also an ongoing discussion about a shortage of qualified commercial drivers that is further complicated by the fact that the drivers that are currently active in the transportation industry are an aging workforce.

We agree that there is a need for an influx of new drivers into the transportation industry. In an effort to make a positive contribution towards recruiting and training new drivers and dockworkers and upgrading the skills of incumbent dockworkers, the Teamsters Union, in collaboration with the Department of Labor and several motor carrier employers, established a transportation worker apprenticeship program. However, we are aware of some stakeholders looking at this crisis as an opportune time to expand the driver workforce by lowering the minimum driving age for commercial motor vehicle operators in interstate commerce. We disagree, commercial driving is an extremely complex job, and to perform this job safely, drivers have to be able to competently operate a large vehicle, efficiently manage time, and make life decisions to manage their health and safety. Failure to meet these criteria can result in significant consequences regarding the health and safety of the driver, the motoring public, and due to the pandemic, the

stability of the supply chains. Not to mention the callousness of suggesting there is a lack of trained drivers in this country while millions of workers, including many truck drivers, are out of work.

Conclusion

There has never been a more challenging time to be a driver than now. Conditions our members have been working under during the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented. Our drivers and other members have been providing non-stop service, under extraordinary circumstances, to keep our nation's supply chain open for business. This workforce is critically important to this nation's ability to maintain operational supply chains and should be afforded the protections and support need to enable them to perform their jobs safely. We thank you for the opportunity to present our experience to you today.