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THE VANCOUVER SUN

Truck strike will damage business, says port official: But truckers say they can't survive on diminishing take-home pay

Vancouver Sun

Monday, June 27, 2005

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Section: News

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Toasters, clothing, sporting equipment and other goods produced and shipped from Asia could become increasingly scarce on B.C. store shelves if a dispute involving more than 1,000 Vancouver container truck drivers is not resolved this week, a Vancouver Port Authority official said Sunday.

"I can't overestimate the concern and impact that this could have if this is a prolonged dispute," said port spokeswoman Anne McMullin.

As of Friday afternoon, truckers with the Vancouver Container Truck Association (VCTA) stopped shipping millions of dollars worth of goods to and from the region's ports in a dispute over wages and a fuel surcharge.

The strike comes after more than a month of failed negotiations between the association, which represents 80 per cent of Vancouver container truck drivers, and the 46 shipping companies the drivers work for, according to Paul Johal, VCTA executive committee member.

McMullin said stores such as The Bay, Canadian Tire, and Wal-Mart rely on the trucking industry to deliver the goods that arrive every day through the local ports. If the dispute continues, she said the cargo containers will start to pile up on the docks "within a matter of days" instead of reaching store shelves.

McMullin said 40 per cent of all container cargo arriving in Vancouver -- carrying goods worth about \$30 million a day -- is moved by truck. The remaining 60 per cent of container cargo is moved by rail, McMullin said, but that goes to other parts of the country.

Container trucks are also necessary to haul Canadian-produced goods destined for overseas, such as pork and produce, McMullin said.

Werner Knittel, B.C. division vice-president of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said any disruption in container traffic will force retailers and manufacturers to look for shipping alternatives, including rerouting cargo to other ports of entry.

"If they can't get the product to the rail yards or onto a ship to Asia because of disruptions, they've got to find alternatives ... they could truck it south to Seattle," Knittel said.

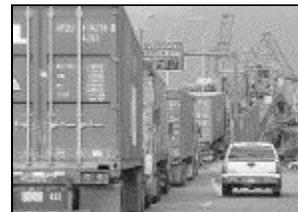
Johal said shipping rates paid to container truck drivers by the companies they work for have steadily decreased in the past 15 years, making it increasingly difficult for independent truck owner-operators like himself to make a living.

While container truck drivers can make about \$400 a day hauling shipping containers, he said the average amount of take-home pay after 10 to 12 hours of work can be as little as \$50 a day after about \$350 for daily expenses to run the truck.

"That's why all the drivers are crying, because they aren't making any money right now," he said.

Johal said the problem has been the result of increasing fuel costs and competition between the companies they work for.

IMAGES



Vancouver Sun files

A work slow-down by container truckers also managed to cripple the port in April, but they stepped up their protests over the weekend. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)

"They keep undercutting each other to get more work. One guy pulls for \$100, another guy undercuts to \$90, and the next guy will do it for cheaper, and it's the drivers who suffer," he said.

Drivers want a 15-per-cent fuel surcharge and a set standard of wages paid to drivers which company owners can use to charge shipping companies, importers and exporters, Johal said.

Knittel said constant disruptions at the Port of Vancouver can seriously hurt the reputation of the port.

"What you're looking at further down the road is if they don't have the confidence [in the port's reliability], they'll start rerouting other containers and put them on different ships moving to Seattle or Portland or into L.A. It's that disruption of confidence," he said.

Johal said drivers realize the work stoppage will affect the port authority and the economy, "but if we keep on driving like this, we're not going to last long because we'll be broke within a couple months with high fuel prices and they'll have no trucks."

The VCTA job action follows a two-week strike earlier this month by 1,000 Lower Mainland gravel truck drivers who shut down several construction sites until they reached an agreement with contractors that gave them a 12-per-cent fuel surcharge and a formula to deal with future fuel price changes.

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Illustration:

- Photo: Vancouver Sun files / A work slow-down by container truckers also managed to cripple the port in April, but they stepped up their protests over the weekend.

Idnumber: 200506270098

Edition: Final

Story Type: Business

Length: 675 words

Keywords: STRIKES; PORTS; VANCOUVER; BRITISH COLUMBIA; SHIPPING

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo

PRODUCTION FIELDS

BASNUM: 4378502

NDATE: 20050627

NUPDATE: 20050629

DOB: 20050627

POSITION: 1

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