

Keep on truckin': An overhaul of New York's port rules would bring vital jobs to the state

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With [President Obama's](#) administration urging Congress to pass an economic stimulus quickly, local leaders should waste no time pointing to a smart, stable source of middle-class jobs: port trucking in [New York's](#) regional economy. If we reverse years of dangerous deregulation, thousands of new low-paying jobs could quickly become sustainable middle-class jobs.

Few New Yorkers are aware of just how critical port trucking is to our city, state and region. Nearly \$15 billion in goods moved locally by truck and rail last year, according to the Port Authority. That figure dovetails with research from the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#) showing persistent strength in urban manufacturing and transport of goods, with specialized firms employing many thousands of New Yorkers, even in the midst of this terrible downturn.

These firms pay their workers \$49,000 on average. Yet approximately 7,000 truck drivers in and around New York's ports earn on average \$28,000 because of trucking deregulation that began in the 1980s, according to a new study by the [Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations](#).

That deregulation enabled bosses to dispatch cargo through so-called independent contractors. Treating these drivers as small businessmen rather than employees has prohibited the drivers from joining unions - and essentially enabled the companies to cheat on payroll taxes.

A majority of these port truckers are recent immigrants with no negotiating power or workplace rights. Their lives are dictated by ocean shipping lines and trucking companies trying to get maximum productivity at minimal expense. These drivers have to pay for their own truck maintenance, fuel, road taxes, tire insurance and tolls. They are covered neither by workers' compensation nor by any labor legislation that protects fair wages, hours, occupational safety or health.

They're not the only victims of the system. The [Rutgers](#) study reveals how the structure of the trucking industry passes off huge labor and environmental costs to the rest of us. Ordinary citizens are paying for the environmental effects of diesel emissions, for the health care of drivers and their families who can't afford insurance and for the congestion on freight routes that often run through residential neighborhoods.

Port truck drivers operating with such low profit margins are most likely to use the least expensive trucks available, older and far more polluting than newer, cleaner trucks. The cheapest trucks emit the most dangerous fumes in neighborhoods closest to the ports, making the air increasingly toxic and causing severe spikes in asthma rates.

The trucking industry should no longer be allowed to get away with forcing truck drivers and taxpayers to shoulder this burden. The Port Authority, along with [Gov. Paterson](#) and [Mayor Bloomberg](#), should push for new regulations that would require the trucking industry to absorb the total labor and environmental costs of doing business in our region.

West Coast ports are already doing this. In [Los Angeles](#), the largest port city in the nation, a new Clean Trucks Program, recently endorsed by President Obama, mandates that all port truck drivers are treated as full employees, enabling them to bargain collectively for fair wages and benefits. It also compels trucking companies and their giant shipping clients like [Wal-Mart](#), [Target](#) and [Nike](#) to take responsibility for cleaner truck technology.

When they earn higher wages and benefits, port truck drivers can contribute more to their local economies while performing the necessary maintenance on their vehicles to keep their surrounding communities healthy and free of hazardous emissions.

Hard as it is to imagine these days, there can still be good economic news for New York - if policy makers do the right thing.

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