After the union organizers and driver volunteers blitzed the port – distributed leaflets announcing the Saturday night general meeting to as many drivers as they could on Saturday - the Teamsters Union held an open meeting at the Local 848 hall, with portraits of Samuel Gompers, John L. Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Mother Jones, Cesar Chavez, and Jimmy Hoffa looming down from the walls. By 5:30, the room was full of drivers, their wives and children, union organizers, and IBT staff who’d been flown in from the Washington, D.C. headquarters, and from Teamster strongholds around the country. There was also a strong presence of Teamster staff people and officers from southern California locals, from Orange County to San Bernardino, to Los Angeles.

To my surprise, the evening’s Master of Ceremonies was not one of the International Union staff. Instead, Alex Paz, the driver who’d been fired for protesting misclassification, and was now working at a union drayage firm, stood up front, before the mike and the projection screen. Alex’s primary role was to introduce leaders of the rank-and-file organizing going on at nine of the combined ports’ trucking firms. Everything Alex said was repeated; first he spoke in Spanish, then in English. Almost all of the drivers he introduced spoke in Spanish, and Teamster staffer translated. (Below: Alex Paz, fired from Pac 9, is Master of Ceremonies)
Spirits were running high. Alex started off by summarizing the accomplishments of the strike’s first three days. Before the strike even began, on the very even of the strike, Green Fleet, which had reneged on its July promise to explore ways of achieving labor peace, in the process, defying LA Mayor Garcetti, who had brokered the agreement, sued for another chance to resolve conflicts with the unions. Alex worked up the crowd by reminding everyone that the firm’s owner had vowed to go out of business before he’d ever talk to the union. His brave talk of the summer was now inoperative. Talks, Alex explained, to loud cheers, would begin the following Tuesday.

After the strike began, Alex went on, the remaining struck companies, Pac 9 and TTSI, found their trucks being turned away by terminal operators who didn’t want to take action that would bring in Teamster pickets. Again, the crowd erupted in jeers, and dozens of fists were raised in triumph. The struck companies quickly sought out Mayor Garcetti’s intervention, and by noon Friday, discussions between the company owners, lawyers, and ceo’s, the Mayor, IBT leaders, and striker representatives were underway. (More cheers). As the union removed its pickets from the ports, company leaders agreed to a joint statement which promised continuing
serious discussions, and went so far as to pledge to respect the drivers’ rights as workers to form a union if they wanted to. (More loud cheers, whistles, and the sound of chairs scraping the floor as drivers rise to their feet). Alex even projected the joint statement signed by the company officials on the large screen that covered the space at the front of the stage. Everyone could read what the companies had promised.

Following Alex’s upbeat update, he introduced nine drivers who had taken the lead in organizing at their respective drayage companies. All of these leaders were men, all were Hispanic, most spoke in Spanish, and waited for a bilingual staffer to translate. (It should be noted that all of the drivers actually spoke English as well as Spanish, but it was a clear rule that when two or more drivers conversed, they always used Spanish, the language of their homes. Most of the leaders told of the hardships they’d overcome to reach their current strong hold. They told of working for low wages, of innumerable deductions taken from their paychecks, waiting on long lines to pick up containers traveling short distances for low compensation. They talked of wage theft, employer intimidation, discharges for those who spoke up. I was surprised at how often the driver-leaders talked of their problem as being misclassified as independent contractors when they were really employees with all the rights and legal protections pertaining to that status. Years before, when I had surveyed the truckers, most of them had insisted that as owner-operators, they thought of themselves as small businessmen chasing the American dream of going from rags to riches. Back then, they’d resented being called misclassified, thinking it negated the fact that they were truck owners in business for themselves. Now, misclassification was the word of the hour, for it meant they could get their jobs back, assert their rights, and most importantly, demand respect.
It was the Teamsters, of course, who had taught the drivers that they were misclassified. The lawyer they were referred to by the Teamsters, Julie Gutman Dickinson, had shown them what power they had when she proved over and over again in court that their work relationship was that of an employee, which meant that they had rights and legal protections under California and federal law. Julie came in for loud applause.

So did Nick Weiner, who had been named by the Change to win federation to oversee the organizing campaign. Nick had abandoned his D.C. garb for an orange Teamster work vest, and his voice reflected the same determination to demonstrate the campaign’s fighting spirit. When Nick turned to the drivers from the six companies whose representatives had spoken, and asked each group whether they wanted to strike on Monday, every group responded with fist pumping, cheers, and chants of Si Se Puede. (Below: Photo of Nick Weiner, speaking to strikers before a portrait of Samuel Gompers).

Nick was followed at the mike by, a vice-president of SEIU Local 721, who promised that her organization, which represents more than 70,000 public sector employees in the metro-LA area. In loud Spanish sentences, punctuated by chants which called forth enthusiastic response from the drivers, she explained that the port truckers’ fight was her union’s fight, and she promised that dozens of her local’s activists would join the drivers on their picket lines come
Monday morning. This show of labor solidarity was the final ingredient that brought the troqeros to their feet. As a result of the progress made by the strikes of Thursday and Friday, the drivers roared out their determination to widen the strike. It was a daring gambit.

(Below: Strike leaders from several trucking companies).