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On the job with a port trucker

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Port truckers like Marvin Palacios -- there are at least 2,000 in South Florida, mostly Hispanic, young and male, who haul cargo from the ports to regional distribution centers and back the other way for export -- are the tiniest players in a global transport chain comprised of giants like railroads, ocean shippers, terminal operators and intermediaries who store and consolidate cargo.

The giants have profited as maritime trade surged over the last 50 years. But port truckers never cashed in. Some, like Palacios, are doing worse than when they started.

Not until 10:30 a.m. in a Doral industrial park did Palacios -- 52 and breathing hard, red-faced in the heat -- back into the loading dock for his first load of the day, a 20-foot container holding 9,113 pounds of resin solution with a flash point of 13 degrees Celsius.

The load had originated at a Kalamazoo, Mich., chemical company and was bound for a Santiago, Chile, medical supplies company a hemisphere away. First, though, Palacios had to haul it 37 miles to Port Everglades.

"Four hours and I haven't earned a dime yet," he said, through a translator.

It was a \$90 job but the resin was considered Hazmat, which brought a \$25 bonus. That was good because Palacios hadn't been earning. Maybe it's just the annual summer slowdown; maybe, he suggested, it's because the dispatcher is giving work to his favorite drivers and shutting out the rest.

There'd been no jobs Monday, none Tuesday, one Wednesday, three Thursday. That meant -- factoring in the cost of diesel -- he was earning \$6.31 an hour, less than Florida's minimum wage. The last week had been worse.

Thirty years ago most port truckers were unionized, with wages and benefits. It was a middle-class job.

That ended with industry deregulation in 1980.

Deregulation allowed for a sudden and massive proliferation of nonunion competitors (in 1979, according to Time Magazine, there were 16,600 truck lines in the nation; by 2004, according to the Department of Transportation, there were 677,249 truck and bus companies).

At the same time, logistical and technological advances -- the adoption of the cargo container as a unit of global transport, the development of a fleet of ships big enough to carry those containers by the thousand -- permitted a similarly massive increase in ocean-bound trade.

A THANKLESS JOB

But more trade didn't mean more money for the port truckers.

Today there are few union jobs left. Most truckers aren't even considered employees, but independent contractors.

This means no benefits or guaranteed wages. Instead, port truckers are paid per move (a portion of the fee negotiated between the truck firm and the shipper or freight forwarder). Bad traffic, or slow loading or unloading at either end of the trip, cuts into their earnings. Deregulation also means -- in theory, at least -- that truckers negotiate their own rates and hours and pick their own jobs.

But shipping rates are often determined by ocean shippers and retail giants who make agreements in which truck drivers don't have a voice. Besides, it's difficult to negotiate when you speak almost no English, \$1,400 rent is coming up and you've got a \$28,000 truck burning diesel at \$2.80 a gallon.

"You really can't say anything," Palacios said. "At my age, there's no sense in being cool . . . They just give you [a truck], and if you want to take it, fine. If you don't, they'll get someone else who will."

The American Trucking Association, an industry group, puts port truckers' incomes between the high \$20,000s and the high \$90,000s; the Teamsters Union, which used to represent many port truckers, suggests a considerably narrower range, between \$20,000 and \$22,000.

Palacios said he grossed around \$50,000 last year but diesel, maintenance, tolls and tags reduced his net income to under \$20,000.

He is what an economist might call an irrational actor. He sells his life cheap when better deals are available.

He knows how to weld; he knows basic mechanics; he's strong enough to work construction. Any one of these fields might earn him more money and take less of his time than port trucking.

But Palacios is, much to his detriment, a romantic. "This is a profession," he said. "A truck driver owns his truck. He's king of the road. . . . I had that feeling because of my dad."

He sometimes starts crying when he talks about his dad but now he continued, dry-eyed: "You see that sign, Only Professional Drivers Wanted -- that sign, it's a badge of honor."

A number of wildcat actions in South Florida earlier in the decade -- spurred by low rates, long waiting times at ports and high gas prices -- accomplished little for the truckers (and actually got some sued under antitrust law). A Teamsters attempt to establish a hiring hall failed.

UNION AMBITIONS

Now Teamsters organizers are back at work in South Florida, and more organizing attempts may be coming. A long-awaited federal program that would require port truckers and others who work in sensitive areas of the nation's ports to carry Transit Worker Identification Cards may give organized labor more heft by diminishing the labor pool. (Anywhere from 10 to 50 percent of port truckers are thought to be undocumented

immigrants. The number is probably lower at South Florida ports, where higher security standards have been in place for years.)

And in January, the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach -- the largest port complex in the nation -- will require trucking firms serving the ports to hire their truckers on as employees.

The move comes after years of lobbying by labor and environmental groups concerned about air pollution caused by the ports' fleet of aging diesel trucks.

"It's going to have an important effect on every port in the country," said Chuck Mack, Teamsters port division director. "It's going to have everyone in the world looking at it, at the advantages come out of this program -- not just on the driver side but . . . environmental, security, efficiency."

Curtis Whalen, director of ATA's Intermodal Motor Carriers Conference, predicts this model will be difficult to replicate here -- not least because the ATA plans a legal challenge if it's actually implemented. "The presumption is the owner-operator is glad to give up independence," he said. "We don't think that would happen. This is not a group that wants to organize and pay dues. These people are not joiners. They are independent by nature."

Palacios, at least, believes unionization is on the way, and he's looking forward to it. "There's going to be a change," he said. "I don't know when, but there will be change. Naturally, it will be good, up to a point."

(Ellen Kennedy, a spokeswoman for Port Everglades, says the issue has yet to be addressed. "It hasn't even come up in discussions here," she said.)

Palacios took the Palmetto Expressway north, straight into a traffic jam. By the time he'd inched his way onto I-95, it was raining. On the highway, rain always means trouble.

Earlier in the morning he'd pointed out the crushed remains of a truck cab in an Opa-locka junkyard; the driver had flipped it, and died, on I-595.

Nationwide, in 2005, one out of every eight traffic fatalities resulted from a collision involving a large

truck, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and South Florida is one of the most dangerous regions in a dangerous state to drive a truck.

NOT A BAD RECORD

Palacios says he's been in only one accident, in 2000. An old man in a car swerved in front of him; he jammed on his brakes, flipping his trailer and herniating three discs in his back. He returned to work two days later.

He had to. "I still had rent, lights, bills to pay," he said.

Now he kept a wide gap between the truck and the car in front of him and leaned forward in his seat, squinting through the windshield. It was raining hard and most drivers of four-wheelers have no idea what it takes to stop 90,000 pounds traveling 55 miles per hour.

While running under dispatch, Palacios is covered by his company's liability insurance. Many owner-operators are required by their companies to buy "bobtail" insurance to cover them off the clock, but Palacios' company doesn't require it. At \$1,800 a year, he can't afford it anyway.

He joined a line of trucks waiting to get into Port Everglades.

Two thousand, nine hundred 20-foot equivalent containers units, or TEUs, would move through the port this day; 864,030 moved in all of last year, which, along with bulk cargo deliveries of cement and lumber and the like, represented almost \$18 billion worth of merchandise.

NECESSARY GOODS

Inbound containers held bananas, ceramic tiles and clothing assembled in South and Central America. The outbound held fabric, paper, building materials, electronics and groceries.

If container trade were suddenly halted at Port Everglades, Florida consumers might not feel much of an effect; but within weeks, there would be shortages on shelves of supermarkets all across the Caribbean.

Here, and at ports around the world, trade sometimes idles, as two very different modes of

transport grind against one another: It might take a day or two for the towering gantry cranes to offload the thousands of containers aboard most ships, but then each one must be stacked, located and reloaded onto trucks.

So cargo backs up. So do the trucks, sometimes to the surface streets. (The problem is so bad at the Port of Miami, an island with one bridge attaching it to the mainland, that a \$1 billion tunnel may be the only solution, but dithering over the city's proposed \$50 million contribution is holding up the deal).

Palacios showed his card again to get into the Florida International Terminal, where pneumatic-jawed forklift trucks were stacking and unstacking container canyons. There are at least 1,100 container hauls to and from the port each day; now about 40 truckers sat in their trucks, waiting for a single longshoreman to lead into the container canyons to drop or pick up.

Palacios whistled with relief, seeing the much longer line at a nearby terminal, and got in line.

His truck shuddered when a forklift laid it bare. It took only an hour for him to make it out -- half as long as usual, he said.

The Eagle lumbered back south. Inside the cab there was a teddy bear named Pancho, a Bible and blaring Colombian cumbia music.

It was getting on toward two in the afternoon and the dispatcher wasn't calling.

Palacios wasn't sure what he'd do with the rest of the afternoon. Emma, his girlfriend, would be waiting at the Hialeah home they share with their grown children, done with her cafeteria job. But he wouldn't go, not yet.

"I don't like to go home too early," he said. "I'm embarrassed. It's a sign I didn't get any work."

The air conditioning in his truck didn't really condition, and there was a broken expander valve underneath his seat. Maybe he'd fix those things. He'd feel better, just to do something. "I like to get home late, tell the lady everything's fine," he said.

But the phone rang. It was dispatch, with another job, and he headed west.