Port Privatization in Central America

Puerto Cortez, Honduras And Acajutla, El Salvador

Photo Essay

By David Bacon

Despite the poverty and difficult conditions that plague them, dock workers and port truckers in the Central American ports of Puerto Cortez and Acajutla have tried to form unions. Some have had success, while others have lost their jobs and been blacklisted. All worry that the Central American Free Trade Agreement will lead to privatization and attacks on their unions and income. This photo-documentary shows their conditions as they work or wait for work, and for their families at home.

Few of the privatization assaults in Central America have been as sustained and sharp as those against the longshore workers of El Salvador.

In El Salvador's main port of Acajutla, soldiers occupied the wharves. Using direct military force, new private operators took over the terminals. The Salvadoran dock union was smashed. Efforts to reorganize it since have not been broken and the workers involved have been fired and blacklisted.

The government told workers they could reapply for their old jobs, but with the new private operators. "They told people they'd be liquidated, but they'd get jobs with the private operators," says Carlos David Marroquin, Secretary-Treasurer of the old longshore union, and a former warehouse worker. "But they didn't say how much they'd be paid." The new wage was $12 per day—cutting the daily income of longshoremen by more than 90 percent.

In El Salvador port drivers have a long history of fighting the Danish corporation that has resisted the organizing efforts of truckers around the world more than any other—the Maersk Corporation. Three years ago, a hundred drivers for Bridge International Transport were fired when they tried to win a union contract, and their organization was destroyed. Bridge is owned by Maersk, and hires the drivers who deliver the containers to the company's container ships as they sit at the dock.

Hundreds of drivers do the same labor in U.S. ports as the fired

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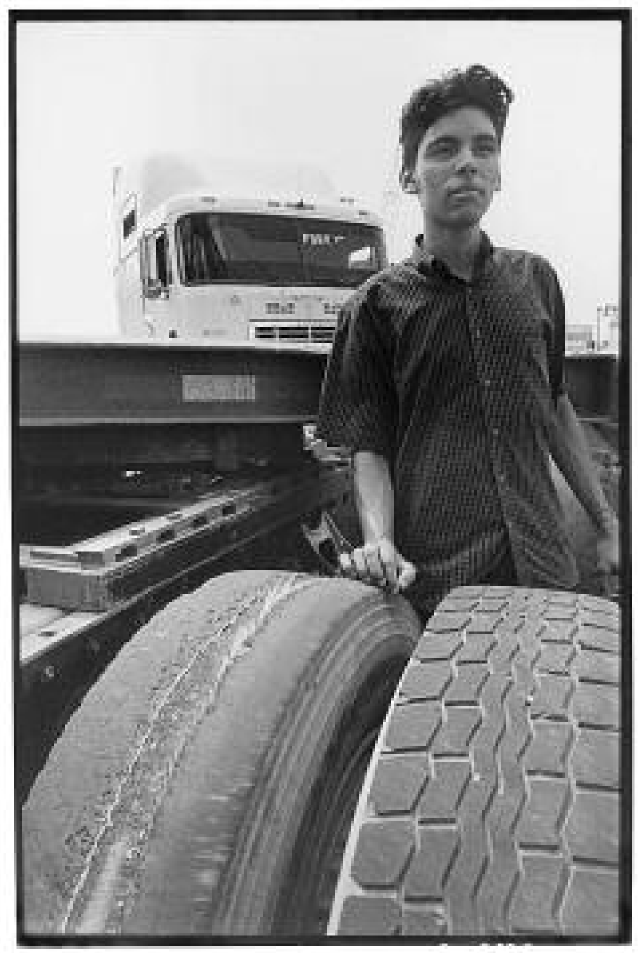

Salvadorans did in Central America, ferrying huge shipping containers to and from Maersk vessels. These workers, however, aren't employed directly by Maersk or its subsidiaries. Instead, drivers own their own trucks, at least in theory. In actual fact, they're heavily indebted to banks and finance companies, which loan them money to purchase their rigs. Drivers have to pay all the costs of operating them—diesel fuel, insurance, parking charges—everything. By the time bills are paid, the average take-home earning for a harbor trucker is $8-9 an hour, making them the lowest-paid big-rig drivers in the United States. They make up a huge group of 50-55,000 people nationally. Some 12,000 work in the port of Los Angeles/Long Beach alone, with about 3,100 in Oakland, 1,800 in Portland, and 2,800 in Tacoma/Seattle, according to Bob Lanshay, Teamsters port organizer.

"We've recognized with these multinational corporations that we cannot deal with them effectively even nationally," explains Chuck Mack, president of Teamsters Joint Council 7 in northern California and director of the union's port division. "We have to develop a program that is international. We're not on the verge of organizing drivers in El Salvador, Central America, or other parts of the world. But we're attempting to work with workers in those countries, to share information, provide help, and get their ideas and perspectives. How do we deal with these multibillion-dollar, multinational corporations? How do we end the exploitation of these drivers? It's a worldwide problem." ■

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