

LETTERS

Solutions for the Shortage of Truck Drivers

Readers suggest guest workers, autonomous trucks, better work conditions and a relay race model.

Nov. 20, 2021

To the Editor:

Re “Lack of Truckers Is Choking U.S. Supply Chain” (front page, Nov. 10):

Despite wage increases, a shortage of truck drivers is exacerbating supply chain issues. Here’s a thought: Why not invite guest workers from Mexico?

In general, I oppose guest worker programs because businesses misuse them to pay employees less than the prevailing wage. But a requirement that guest workers receive on average the same wages as American employees with similar experience and a limit on the number of guest workers could address that issue.

Joshua P. Hill

New London, Conn.

To the Editor:

America’s truck driver shortage existed long before the pandemic, and projections indicate that it will remain a long-term problem. Instead of training teenagers to drive 18-wheelers or forcing retailers to increase their prices, it’s time to seriously consider how autonomous trucks can close links in the supply chain.

To make up the 80,000-driver shortfall and alleviate the heavy toll on truck drivers, autonomous trucks are poised to be active partners within the ecosystem. Autonomous trucks aren’t restricted to a human driver’s schedule, so they can stay away from crowded urban areas during rush hour, and smoother driving can reduce fuel consumption by at least 10 percent. Envisioning a future with both autonomous and human-driven trucks, the Department of Transportation projects that autonomous trucks would increase spending across the U.S. economy by \$111 billion over 30 years.

It’s time for a shift in how Americans think about jobs and autonomous trucks. The two can exist together.

Ariel Wolf
Washington

The writer is general counsel for the Self-Driving Coalition.

To the Editor:

The current truck driver shortage is rooted in sweatshop working conditions imposed by the trucking industry, not a lack of qualified drivers. Nonunion truck drivers, about 97 percent of all drivers, are exempt from a provision of our country's most fundamental worker protection law, the Fair Labor Standards Act, that guarantees payment of overtime wages. They also are paid by the mile, not by the hour, which shamefully encourages speeding.

Federal rules allow 11 hours of driving by truckers per day up to a total of 77 exhausting hours in a seven-day period, far in excess of the standard 40-hour week. Truck driving is one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, risking the lives of truckers and all road users. Since 2009, truck crash fatalities have increased by 45 percent, causing about 5,000 deaths annually. No wonder there is huge turnover among drivers.

The trucking industry's solution of putting teens behind the wheel of 80,000-pound rigs reflects its pursuit of profits over public safety. A study found that truck drivers ages 19 to 20 are six times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than all truck drivers. This is a reckless proposal. What's next? Allowing teens into the cockpits of commercial airlines to address a pilot shortage?

Russ Swift
Joan Claybrook

Mr. Swift, whose son was killed by a teenage truck driver, is co-chair of Parents Against Tired Truckers. Ms. Claybrook is chair of Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways and former administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

To the Editor:

The answer is *trains*. Less polluting; savings on rebuilding our roads and bridges that trucks destroy quickly; eliminates road terrorism by huge trucks; less fuel use; etc., etc.

Wake up, America and politicians!

Peggy Conroy
West Chazy, N.Y.

To the Editor:

One of the deterrents to recruiting more truckers is, quite understandably, the lifestyle of being on the road for many days or even a few weeks at a time, with the attendant loneliness and isolation.

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Yes, we can try hiring more 18-year-olds, and allowing truckers to drive even more sleepy hours. But how about a trial of giving truckers some more life at home — what I call the Short-Haul Trucking Model for Long-Haul Trucking?

Instead of assigning a driver to go from, say, Los Angeles to Portland, Maine, and back, a trucking company would change the model: Driver No. 1 drives the first 1,000 miles of the trip in two days. He is replaced by a fresh Driver No. 2, who lives in the changeover city. Driver No. 2 drives two days to the next changeover city. A third fresh driver gets the truck to Maine. Meanwhile, each driver takes a different truck back to his home city.

Each driver is away from home only three nights. He drives two days out, then two days back, then gets a few days off. More humane.

It probably wouldn't work for small trucking companies. But with a lot of planning, the big companies should be able to work out the scheduling. Worth a try?

Barbara Herzog
Washington

To the Editor:

While the article identifies a critical problem facing our nation's supply chain, it omits a key cause: the sexual harassment that women truckers face.

As the article notes, only 7 percent of truckers are women. A way to grow the field of truckers is recruiting and retaining more women drivers. A report by Time'sUp Foundation and the Institute for Women's Policy Research shows that sexual harassment can flourish in isolated, male-dominated fields such as trucking, pushing women out of the industry or discouraging them from joining in the first place.

This is costly both to women themselves — our research shows sexual harassment can cost women as much as \$1.3 million during their lifetime — and the economy overall. Failure to systemically address this harassment will result in failure to diversify the field and yet another missed opportunity to grow our economy.

Katherine Gallagher Robbins
Santa Fe, N.M.

The writer is senior director for research at Time'sUp.

To the Editor:

It is unsustainable for a country to depend on goods shipped halfway across the globe. Most Americans feel so entitled to instant consumerism that any concerns regarding sustainability, carbon emissions and local resilience are overlooked. To help ease our current supply chain deficiencies, perhaps the best solution involves each of us consuming less until supply chain bottlenecks cease.

Given the crises the world is going through and America's well-known overconsumption, wouldn't it be reasonable to reduce levels of consumption as a favor to your fellow citizens and to the world?

Kevin Wu Almanzar
Vancouver, British Columbia

To the Editor:

I couldn't help wondering whether another major factor in the loss of truckers that is choking the nation's supply chain — in addition to the wave of retirements cited in the story — is the phenomenal surge in the number of Amazon trucks and delivery vans on our highways and streets.

Paul Jellinek
Mercerville, N.J.

To the Editor:

The lack of truckers isn't unique in today's labor market, because it's really the same story with so many other undervalued jobs that are vital to our economy. Be it truckers, restaurant workers, retail employees or health care workers, we notice them only when there aren't enough to take care of our needs. And between the lingering pandemic and the demographics of the U.S. population, it will most likely get worse.

There is a solution, however, and it's called immigration reform. There are tens of thousands of able-bodied people willing — and happy — to do the jobs Americans would rather not do. Sensible reform could grant work visas with a path to citizenship, while carefully vetting each applicant.

Most of America's most aggressive economic growth was fueled by waves of immigration. Why should we forsake it now? While most of the Republican Party views immigration as a problem, we need to see it as an opportunity.

Richard Goldman
Solon, Ohio

A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: Solutions for the Trucker Shortage