

# Building a Sturdy Blue-Green Coalition at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach

Jessica Durrum

**A** week before Labor Day, about 30 Los Angeles-Long Beach port truck drivers walked off the job, joining the waves of low-wage worker strikes across the country.

The drivers' 24-hour strike was elaborate, extending up to 70 miles away from the company, Green Fleet Systems, as teams of mobile pickets chased strike-breaking trucks to picket them at their destinations. Hundreds of supporters from the Teamsters and other labor unions, alongside community and environmental justice groups rallied at the truck yard, eight miles from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Over 20 faith leaders and elected officials lent moral and political support, from walking the picket line in the middle of the night to accompanying the drivers through a tense stand-off with management as they attempted to return to work at the strike's end.

The outpouring of support for the striking drivers has its roots in a seven-year campaign advanced by an ambitious, innovative coalition, the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports. In 2006, nearly 40 diverse organizations joined forces to radically transform the port trucking industry in Los Angeles and Long Beach. Their mission: cleaning the air of deadly emissions and uplifting a workforce of over 16,000 low-wage workers at one of the most critical sites to global trade.



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## The ports of poverty and pollution

Together, the twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach make up the largest port complex in the Western Hemisphere. Over \$300 billion in cargo flows through the two ports each year. Goods movement is one sector of the economy that has thrived after decades of global economic restructuring that sent manufacturing jobs from the U.S.—many of them from Los Angeles and Long Beach—to shores with cheaper labor and weaker environmental laws.

However, the prosperity generated by the rise in port traffic has not been shared evenly. In the backyard of the ports and along the corridors traveled by the trucks carrying containerized goods are dense urban neighborhoods that have borne the brunt of two major externalities of an unregulated port trucking industry: lethal pollution and poverty jobs.

The ports had long been characterized by dirty diesel emissions that were literally clouding the air and killing people. A 2007 LAANE study concluded that port trucks were causing over \$1.4 billion of health impacts *every year*, with three people dying *every week* because of emissions from port trucks. Low-income communities of color disproportionately suffered the impact of these “diesel death zones,” creating an environmental justice crisis.

Meanwhile, trucking companies have also shifted to the public the very cost of doing business. Although port trucking can't be offshored like manufacturing—for the practical reality that merchandise physically has to get from the ship to the shelves—jobs for port truck drivers have suffered from the same race to the

bottom. Since deregulation of the trucking sector in the 1980s, what were once good, union jobs became low-wage jobs with no benefits. Without industry oversight, trucking companies began disguising their employees as “independent contractors,” passing on the main cost of running a trucking business to their drivers: trucks (including all related expenses such as fuel, maintenance and insurance). By misclassifying drivers, trucking companies also avoid paying unemployment and payroll taxes, and subvert laws guaranteeing employees’ rights, such as minimum wage, overtime, workers compensation and the right to organize. This exacerbated the environmental crisis, as drivers could not properly maintain their old diesel rigs, let alone afford the newest, low-emissions trucks.

### Reimagining a new system

For years, various groups had been tackling the environmental and economic crises from separate fronts.

Community-based environmental justice groups including East Yards Communities for Environmental Justice, Communities for Better Environment and Coalition for a Safe Environment and national environmental organizations such as the NRDC and the Sierra Club had been organizing to hold the ports accountable for the environmental impact of their operations.

Drivers had also been self-organizing for years to improve working conditions, even shutting down the ports entirely in 1988, 1993 and 1996. However, as long as they were misclassified as independent contractors, their very right to organize was denied.

In 2006, a political opportunity emerged. The two ports launched the Clean Air Action Plan (CAAP), a platform to mitigate the environmental impact of port operations. The CAAP itself was already a community victory; the ports adopted it in direct response to community organizing and a National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) lawsuit that

was inhibiting port infrastructure expansion. Yet this initial victory was only a step. A broader coalition, bringing multiple perspectives, voices and expertise would be necessary to craft an alternative solution to radically transform the port trucking industry.

Bringing together that multiplicity of perspectives presented a challenge in and of itself. Most critically, environmental and labor groups had to first overcome misperceptions that, for example, the Teamsters care more about jobs than healthy air and environmentalists just care about hugging trees and saving spotted owls.

In helping bridge differences and bring everyone to the table to begin to find common cause, LAANE—the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy—played a critical role. Over the past 20 years, LAANE has built diverse coalitions between community and labor groups to win substantial victories for working families such as living wage ordinances and community-benefits agreements.

Its campaigns champion the role local government can play in securing decent working and environmental standards in key local industries and the regional economy. LAANE’s trajectory of building trust between community groups and the labor movement situated it in a unique position as a trusted broker.

The “blue and green” groups were joined by public health, immigrant rights, and faith-based organiza-

tions—nearly 40 in all—in launching the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports (CCSP) in late 2006. Through initial series of in-depth, honest conversations, groups overcame initial wariness, built trust and developed a shared analysis that recognized that the issues of poverty and pollution shared a common root cause: an unaccountable industry.

In reimagining the port trucking system, the CCSP crafted a policy that met its agreed-upon principles of being comprehensive, accountable and sustainable: The Clean Truck Program. In order to do business at the ports, trucking companies would have to enter

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Photos: International Brotherhood of Teamsters

**ABOVE AND AT RIGHT**  
Community members and faith and political leaders provided critical support to a successful 24-hour strike at port trucking company Green Fleet Systems in August 2013



Photo: Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports

Thousands of port truck drivers and community members took action during the effort to pass a comprehensive, sustainable Clean Truck Program.



Photo: Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports

Drastic emissions reductions since the Clean Truck Program banned dirty trucks at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are in jeopardy until the economic model of port trucking is transformed.

into a direct contractual relationship with the ports and meet basic standards. Most importantly, only low-emissions “clean” trucks would be permitted entry and companies would be required to hire their drivers as employees, rather than as independent contractors. Critical to long-term sustainability, companies would have to take responsibility for costs of operations and maintenance of new trucks, rather than pushing costs onto the shoulders of low-wage drivers. Otherwise, clean trucks would soon become dirty trucks.

The CCSP carried out a massive organizing effort. They mobilized thousands of community members and drivers to take action, testifying at Harbor Commission meetings and Los Angeles City Hall hearings, signing petitions and postcards, lobbying, rallying in the streets and holding a “die-in” at the ports.

LAANE research also played a key role in framing the issue and quantifying the high public cost of the dysfunctional system. It also helped document that, despite an artificial perceived divide between drivers and community interests, in many cases they are one and the same. LAANE researchers conducted a survey of port drivers, which revealed that many drivers—the vast majority of whom are Latino immigrants—live in the same communities that were suffering the health impact of the diesel pollution.

In 2008, the coalition achieved a groundbreaking victory when the Port of LA Harbor Commission passed the Clean Truck Program. Today, the entire port trucking fleet has been replaced with new clean

trucks. Diesel emissions have been dramatically reduced by as much as 90%, resulting in over 400 fewer premature deaths to date, based on an analysis of data from the California Air Resource Board.

### Subsequent successes and challenges

The concerted coalition-building work prepared the CCSP to weather subsequent challenges. Proposing standards for operations, after 30 years without any, stirred up intense opposition from industry. Powerful global interests along the supply chain like Wal-Mart and other big box stores exert downward pressure to keep costs as low as possible. Local trucking company owners have kept costs low—and in many cases remained quite profitable—precisely because of the lack of oversight since deregulation. To fight the proposed standards, the previously fractured port trucking industry organized.

A month before the Port of LA passed the Clean Truck Program, the Port of Long Beach broke from the process. Caving to industry pressure, it passed a program that would require clean trucks, but that would not require companies to take responsibility for directly hiring their drivers.

Since then, Los Angeles’ Clean Truck Program has been significantly diminished by the trucking industry’s 2008 lawsuit arguing that federal deregulation prohibited the ports from setting any trucking standards whatsoever. The case wound its way to the US Supreme Court, whose June



2013 decision upheld the basic framework of the program. However, it removed two provisions the community had fought for—parking requirements and placards. This followed the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision, which enjoined the employee provision in 2011. As a result, communities and drivers have been left with an unsustainable program.

Where a more fragile, transactional coalition might have split, the CCSP remained intact. Environmental partners did not walk away once the dirty diesel trucks were off the road. The Teamsters did not abandon the blue-green alliance once the driver economics were stripped from the comprehensive policy they had fought for, leaving drivers worse off than before, now saddled with predatory lease payments for the new clean trucks.

The fact that the core partners are still at the table today is a testament to the deep coalition building over the years, through which coalition partners have taken on each other's struggles as interdependent. In doing so, they have learned from each other. Perhaps

the most emblematic of the impact of the CCSP was the Teamsters' reversal on their position on one of the most contentious environmental issues of the past decade. In 2008, Teamster President James Hoffa announced at a gathering of port activists from across the country that the Teamsters were leaving the coalition for increased drilling in ANWR, citing the power of alliances like the CCSP in advancing a shared vision of good jobs and environmental sustainability.

Similarly, community members who may have viewed port drivers as the source of the problem prior to joining the coalition have taken on the drivers' struggle as their own. Coalition partners have supported drivers as they organize for improved working conditions and a voice on the job in the absence of a comprehensive policy solution. In the spring of 2012, when drivers at port trucking company Toll Forwarding were undergoing an intense organizing battle, CCSP partners volunteered as monitors, serving as a community presence at the truck yard and interviewing drivers to document the company's retaliatory actions. Drivers won a historic election

to join the Teamsters—the first of its kind in 30 years—and ratified a contract in December 2012 that set a new standard for high-road port trucking companies.

Today, the coalition is engaged on multiple fronts, working with drivers to organize and to address misclassification while also engaging the Port of LA to ensure robust enforcement of the existing Clean Truck Program. At the same time, there are competing priorities for groups' limited resources and capacity, including two intense environmental justice battles against freeway expansion and the proposed construction of a massive rail yard. Before, when the CCSP was working on passing a comprehensive policy, the economic and environmental issues could move forward in tandem. Navigating this changing landscape requires sensitivity and flexibility.

The coalition's impact has extended beyond the ports. The deep organizing and relationship-building between

labor and environmental organizations helped lay the groundwork for LAANE's subsequent campaign to transform LA's waste and recycling system. A similar coalition including the Teamsters, NRDC, and Sierra Club recently passed a landmark policy to establish basic labor and environmental standards for companies that collect trash and recyclables from LA's businesses and apartment buildings.

While certainly not the first or only such "blue-green" alliance, the CCSP is still strong and vibrant after seven years of victories and setbacks, offering lessons for similar efforts. Critically, the CCSP has been rooted in a diverse group of committed organizations, a foundation grounded in honesty and transparency and a shared analysis and long-term vision for change. Whether supporting striking drivers or testifying at Harbor Commission meetings, the coalition's partners continue to work together towards the interdependent goals of economic and environmental justice at the ports. **P<sup>2</sup>**



Photo: International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Following a 24-hour strike, Green Fleet Services driver Byron Contreras speaks before hundreds of labor and community supporters, alongside faith and political leaders.