



Teamster Position Paper

SAAQ Public Consultation on Road Safety

February 2017

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Foreword

Introduction

The Teamsters Union represents the interests of 4,000 workers in the Quebec trucking industry. Traditionally, the Teamsters Union has been the dominant force representing truck drivers not only in Quebec, but also in Canada and the United States.

In this position paper, we would like to present our point of view on the following topics:

- Fatigue
- The electronic logbook
- Driving under the influence of drugs
- Truck drivers' health
- Heavy vehicles and road safety
- Traffic violations
- Hours at the wheel, schedules and inspections
- Road bans
- Job security
- Awareness of constraints experienced by truck drivers
- The road infrastructure

To begin, it is important to underscore that the safety issues facing truck drivers are structural. To understand these issues, we must look upstream, at how the trucking industry operates.

The Damage of Deregulation

Introduced in the mid-1980s, deregulation in the trucking industry has done considerable harm to the quality of life of truckers and has had an impact on their safety and on the safety of all users of the road network. We will abstain from revisiting this dubious decision of the federal government. Instead, we will focus our attention on its consequences today.

Deregulation led to the proliferation of fly-by-night transport operations. These businesses quickly chipped away at working conditions and profit margins in the industry by offering ridiculously low delivery prices and promising very short delivery deadlines. The entire industry was forced to adjust, and truck drivers' quality of life was significantly reduced by these requirements. Today, by necessity, extremely demanding work conditions have become the norm. We believe these conditions put truck drivers' lives at risk, as well as the lives of everyone else on the road.

Squeezing Trucker Drivers Like Lemons

Anyone with perfunctory knowledge of the industry knows that fly-by-night companies contributed to a change in the industry and that, in the end, truck drivers paid the price. Today, feeling squeezed like lemons, truck drivers are suffering the consequences both mentally and physically. They have been forced to work long hours, neglect their rest and sleep, and cut back on their free time.

Unreasonable Delivery Times

Many clients, the shippers, demand that truck drivers meet minimum – indeed unrealistic – delivery deadlines. This is called “just-in-time” delivery.

Should freight not be delivered on time, these clients impose hefty fines on transport companies who, in turn, pass the consequences along to truck drivers. Over the years, just-in-time freight delivery has become a source of constant stress for truck drivers and, indirectly, a menace to road safety.

Driving at Night ... in Good Health and Well Rested

All of the studies of circadian rhythms show that night work in the road transport industry means heightened risk. Add to this the difficulties and financial impact of just-in-time delivery – unavoidable following the closure of a majority of warehouses – and the result is extraordinary pressure on truck drivers.

The Teamsters Union believes the SAAQ – and more broadly, other levels of government – must consider the impacts of this pressure and stress on truck drivers in this consultation on road safety. This stress can lead drivers to take risks and, as a result, to be involved in road accidents.

The trucking industry is an ecosystem that is entirely dependent on truck drivers who are in good health and well rested.

Issues

Fatigue

Studies looking at truck driver fatigue are well known, and all draw the same conclusion. Nonetheless, many clients are increasingly demanding toward transport companies. The appalling and worrisome consequence is that workers take to the road even if they are tired or sick. They may even be tempted to take risks to make deliveries with unreasonable turnaround times.

Some truck drivers even take drugs (amphetamines) to stay awake.

Today, truckers who work in urban centres are behind the wheel – or on the job – 12 to 14 hours a day. In the past, they could return from work at a reasonable hour, allowing them to spend time with their family.

This is no longer true.

Is it normal to ask truckers to work 60 hours a week, 50-plus weeks of the year? We believe the question answers itself.

So the accountability of clients is an essential part of ensuring safety on the road. Accidents are likely to increase if truck drivers alone continue to shoulder the burden of deliveries demanded with unreasonable deadlines. This is all the more true with thousands of seasoned truck drivers expected to retire in the coming years, making way for a less-experienced labour force.

The Electronic Logbook

Some believe that the electronic logbook (or e-log) is a panacea to fix every problem. We disagree.

The electronic logging devices that will be implemented this year cannot assess human fatigue. To illustrate, let's take Claude, a trucker scheduled to make deliveries overnight on Monday night into Tuesday morning. Because he is proactive and responsible, Claude sleeps all day Monday to be awake and alert come Monday evening. If, by misfortune, Claude is reassigned to work on Tuesday morning, he will not be able to sleep much on Monday night after sleeping all day Monday. So Claude will be tired come Tuesday morning but he won't dare refuse the work assignment in order to keep his job.

Furthermore, if Claude is forced to make deliveries with very tight – even unreasonable – turnaround times, he might take too many risks, potentially leading to dire consequences for himself or other users of the road.

Driving Under the Influence of Drugs

It is illegal, under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, to subject workers to drug screening unless there are very compelling reasons to do so.

Drug use by workers in the trucking industry is a sensitive issue, and is not limited solely to marijuana. As a result, the industry and government must contribute to prevention and education initiatives aimed at truck drivers both for cannabis and other drugs, particularly amphetamines, which some truck drivers take to stay awake and hold up in order to meet the outrageous demands of certain clients.

Truck Drivers' Health

It is appropriate for truck drivers aged 45 to 60 to undergo medical tests every five years, and then every two years over the age of 60, to ensure both their own safety and that of other users of the road. However, the health of truckers is an issue that should be looked at as a whole. Certainly, sleep apnea is a physiological problem, but bear in mind that situational factors conspire against workers in the industry.

When a trucker is under heavy pressure to deliver freight on too tight a schedule and has to adapt to an unpredictable work schedule, it is not surprising that health problems such as sleep apnea arise or worsen.

Heavy Vehicles and Road Safety

Rather than calculating road accidents based on the percentage of heavy vehicles on the road, the SAAQ should look at the number of kilometres driven in relation to the number of accidents. We believe this method to be a more reliable way to obtain a good overview of the situation. Our perception of road safety would no doubt change if we knew that motorists, for example, are involved in one accident for every 100,000 kilometres travelled, compared to 1 million kilometres travelled by truck drivers, on average.

We also recommend that the ISAAC system no longer display alerts while the vehicle is moving since this heightens driver stress, because they feel obliged to pull over and check the system.

In addition, a hands-free cell-phone system should be mandatory aboard all heavy vehicles.

Traffic Violations

Often, in the event of traffic violations, it is drivers of heavy vehicles who pay the fines. Unlike transport companies, truckers rarely have the means to fight tickets.

It is unfortunate that clients and transport companies wash their hands of truck drivers' behaviour, since their demands contribute to the risks taken by truckers.

Hours at the Wheel, Schedules and Inspections

As we said at the beginning of this position paper, hours at the wheel and schedules are two of the biggest issues plaguing the industry. When a shipper demands that freight be delivered by a specific time under threat of penalties, considerable pressure is placed on the truck driver, who feels forced to take risks in order to meet client and industry demands.

When, in addition, we demand that truck drivers inspect their own vehicle, we add yet another stone to their load. Why are STM buses inspected by mechanics while the same is not true of freight trucks? What justifies this difference? Is the life of a truck driver of less value than that of a bus driver or a public transit user?

Road Bans

With respect to road bans, we ask that the government post up-to-date maps online at regular intervals to help truck drivers plan their routes. Road transport professionals need a real-time Web site listing all road sections closed to trucks.

The same is true on the Island of Montreal, where travelling by truck is nightmarish. The workers we represent are sometimes unable to make their deliveries, or are forced to ignore road bans or to make major detours in order to reach their destinations.

Awareness of Constraints Experienced by Truck Drivers

Road safety is everyone's responsibility, without exception – pedestrians, motorists, cyclists, truck drivers, etc. The SAAQ should consider launching a major public awareness campaign to remind everyone of the constraints that truck drivers work under, and of the risks people take when they are too close to a truck. We regularly see a wide range of very dangerous behaviours among road users: motorists who suddenly swerve across the path of tractor trailers, cyclists who disregard truckers' blind spots, pedestrians who insist on crossing against 'do not cross' signals when a truck is turning, etc. The examples are endless.

The Road Infrastructure

We have observed that some traffic circles are not appropriate for tractor trailers. It is not uncommon for a trucker to have to straddle another lane, the sidewalk or a median when they cannot encroach on a mountable curb. We have also seen behaviour among some motorists showing that they do not understand how roundabouts work.

With respect to road restoration and reconstruction, we find that information travels poorly. In some cases, travelling in urban areas becomes a real headache for truckers, particularly on the island of Montreal. The same holds true for snow clearing, which is uneven on some road sections. As for de-icing, the work sometimes leaves much to be desired.

Earlier, we mentioned that rest is essential for truck drivers. If the SAAQ and the government are of the same opinion, rest areas along highways should be made available to truck drivers. We note that, not only is the number of rest areas along highways inadequate, the facilities often do not meet the needs of truckers.

Recommendations of the Teamsters Union

1. Encourage clients and the trucking industry to implement predictable work schedules that respect truck drivers' need for rest.
2. Put a mechanism in place so that truck drivers who face unreasonable delivery deadlines and are issued traffic violations are no longer held exclusively responsible.
3. Launch a public awareness campaign about sharing the road with heavy vehicles.
4. Legislate to put an end to freight delivery within unreasonable timeframes.
5. Implement a real awareness and prevention program for all drugs, where every stakeholder is called on to play a role.
6. Calculate accidents based on kilometres travelled instead of based on the percentage of heavy vehicles among road users.
7. Have heavy vehicles inspected by certified mechanics.
8. Consult with truck drivers regarding the planning of safe and efficient traffic circles; build rest areas that are better suited to truck drivers.
9. Post online up-to-date maps of road bans at regular intervals to help truck drivers plan their routes on Quebec roads.

Conclusion

If the SAAQ and the government take away only one thing from this position paper, it should be that truck drivers must be at the heart of their concerns in order to improve road safety. For this reason, truck drivers must have predictable schedules in order to get enough rest to optimize the likelihood of improving road safety in Quebec.