

Blockade paralyses port, costs B.C. \$30 million daily

Truckers in no rush to talk despite offer of facilitator

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An estimated 1,000 striking truckers put the brakes on more than \$30 million worth of container business at Greater Vancouver ports Monday, warning they're going to stay parked for at least a week regardless of mounting economic damage to the provincial economy.

Terminal operators at the Port of Vancouver and Fraser Port said the strike is shutting off the flow of consumer and industrial goods to the Lower Mainland -- although goods moving in and out of the port via rail to the rest of Canada are not affected, according to the operators of Deltaport and Vanterm.

Operators of Centerm warned the strike will hurt B.C.'s biggest industry, forestry, which is increasingly relying on containers to carry pulp, paper, lumber and fibreboard to international markets -- and therefore has the potential to damage the overall B.C. economy if it continues for any significant period of time.

The federal and provincial governments said they're willing to assist in resolving the dispute between truckers and the companies that employ them, including using a third party to facilitate discussions -- but Vancouver Container Truckers Association spokesman Paul Uppal said the drivers are in no hurry to talk.

"We're overwhelmed by the support we've received today," Uppal said.

"I think at this point in time we don't want to speak with anybody for at least a week. We want our voices to be heard."

In a typical day, truckers carry 2,700 containers through the gates of the region's ports, -- about half that traffic representing Asian consumer and industrial goods coming into the region, and an array of goods including forest industry products moving out.

About 40 per cent of all goods moving through the ports travels by truck.

Monday, in the first day of job action, that traffic slowed to a trickle, with about 50 containers moving through Fraser Surrey Docks -- less than 10 per cent of normal activity -- and the other terminals shut down tight.

"It's at a dead stop," said Darcy Clarkson, president and CEO of P&O Ports Canada, operators of Centerm.

Cliff Stewart, Centerm vice-president of operations, said local exporters are going to suffer because they no longer have the means to load their goods onto ships.

Stewart said forest products "drive the exports" via container from Greater Vancouver's ports.

"It's going to start hurting, very quickly, the entire economy of British Columbia. This is not just about shoes from China," Stewart said.

A spokesman for Fraser Surrey Docks agreed.

"Almost 70 per cent of forest products that are exported from British Columbia, particularly the Lower Mainland, now move in containers, so the impact could be substantial," said Fraser Surrey Docks marketing vice-president Mike Cornish.

"A couple of days probably won't have a substantial impact, but every day we're not working it's 700 trucks backing up."

The truckers are mainly independents who work under contract, and they're seeking better wages from their contractors. Terminal operators and shipping lines companies expressed support for the truckers' hunt for higher pay.

Uppal said the average trucker's wages have plunged, to as little as \$50 a day after expenses, since the industry was deregulated in 1999 -- putting more vehicles on the road and opening up cutthroat competition that has hurt all drivers.

"There is no argument -- everybody believes and agrees that the truckers need more pay. The methodology of how you work that out is the question," said Morley Strachan, director of marketing and strategic planning for TSI Terminal Systems Inc., operator of Deltaport and Vanterm.

Strachan said that for the time being, ships coming into the terminals are still being unloaded, although containers destined for local markets are now accumulating on the properties

"All inland cargo is not affected -- anything going by rail to Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal, Chicago. Those are all very active."

Rick Jeffrey, president and CEO of the Coast Forest Products Association, said the economic impacts of the strike are not immediately clear.

Association members annually ship one billion board feet of lumber via containers, mainly to Asian markets -- although some of that volume is shipped from other venues around the province.

"It's definitely going to have an impact on us if it persists," Jeffrey said.

Werner Knittel, B.C. vice-president of Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, said many of his members will suffer most by being cut off from supplies of Asian industrial goods that are used to manufacture products shipped to customers in the United States.

"That's the biggest issue, but the overall impact is as big as your imagination," Knittel said.

B.C. Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon said the government is "obviously very concerned" about what a partial shutdown like this can have on the economy, not just of British Columbia, but of the other western provinces that rely on B.C.'s ports.

Falcon said that because the dispute is between parties in the private sector, there is no defined role for the province.

"Unless we can be convinced that there is some reasonable prospect that our involvement will help bring about a solution, we are not going to be getting involved."

But Falcon added that ministry staff are in contact with several parties involved in the dispute to determine if involvement by the province would help bring about a solution.

"The economy of the province will definitely be impacted. Probably the first to suffer will be the local economy," said Vancouver Port Authority operations vice-president Chris

Badger.

"We estimate that about \$30 million in goods are carried in and out of the port by truck on a daily basis."

A federal spokesman said both the Labour Ministry and Transport Canada are monitoring the situation.

Peter Graham, director of communications for federal Labour Minister Joe Fontana, said the minister has instructed his officials to contact the parties in the dispute "and find out if there was interest on both of their parts to use the services of the federal mediation and conciliation services to help find a solution to this."

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TRUCKS STOP HERE:

Activity at Greater Vancouver ports has ground to a halt since truckers have been on strike. A look at the issue:

- Striking truckers are mainly independent, working under contract. They are seeking better wages.
- A truckers' spokesman says the average wage has plunged, to as little as \$50 a day after expenses, since the industry was deregulated in 1999.
- In a typical day, truckers carry 2,700 containers through the gates of the region's ports.
- On the first day of job action, traffic slowed to about 50 containers moving through Fraser Surrey Docks -- less than 10 per cent of normal.

Ran with fact box "Trucks Stop Here", which has been appended to the end of the story.

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