



Univision's Primer Impacto Investigates Dangerous Road for Port Drivers

Mar 31 2009 12:00AM

Hispanic PR Wire

WASHINGTON, March 31 /PRNewswire-HISPANIC PR WIRE/ -- On Wednesday April 1st, 5 pm ET/PT, Primer Impacto, Univision's award-winning national news program, will air an investigative report on the dangerous conditions facing port drivers. The segment reveals daily life on the job for this mostly immigrant workforce, and their fight to unite together to win a shot at the American Dream.

Some 88,000 port drivers keep our economy moving each day, with 16,800 mostly Latino immigrants in the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports alone. Most are victims of an exploitive, highly-polluting industry that has used a loophole in the law for decades to misclassify them as independent contractors. This tactic -- which has been the subject of a California Attorney General crackdown -- allows trucking companies to deny the drivers basic rights including access to health care, retirement benefits, worker compensation and skirt work rules and safety regulations.

"Deregulation allowed this industry to use a scheme to squeeze every bit of profit on the backs of hard-working drivers," said Ricardo Hidalgo, a former truck driver now with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters featured in Primer Impacto. "That's why local elected leaders, community residents, clergy and worker advocates are standing with them and demanding these companies legitimately employ their workers now."

Port drivers in cities nationwide are organizing Primer Impacto viewing parties to educate family and community members about their working conditions. The job is also dangerous, leading to accidents that often go unreported and in some cases result in death.

Univision follows two families whose lives were forever changed by accidents that occurred while a loved one was working at the Port of Long Beach. The segment invites viewers to witness the devastating impact of these tragedies too common in our nation's ports.

Efrain Medrano worked as a so-called independent contractor for over six years before a cargo container dropped directly on the truck he was inside at the Port of Long Beach in 2005. The accident totaled his vehicle and Medrano sustained severe back and leg injuries. Uninsured, he relied on a local clinic rather than an emergency room.

Stricken by panic attacks, nightmares and stress, Medrano was unable to function. According to Medrano a port representative convinced him to sign a waiver for a small, quiet settlement. As an immigrant who spoke little English, it wasn't clear if Medrano understood what he was signing. He suffered a stroke soon after the accident, and now lives on public assistance. By law, no investigation was completed because Medrano was an independent contractor.

Pablo Antonio Garcia was tragically killed on January 28 when his truck was struck by a forklift while raising the landing gear of a chassis at the Port of Long Beach, pinning him between two chassis that led to massive internal injuries. Garcia left behind a wife and three children.

Garcia's family was not left without support, because two months before his death he became an employee driver at Maritech Trucking Inc. Garcia was a new member of the Teamsters Union. He and his fellow drivers were able to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement that included overtime pay, health care and a \$12,000 death benefit. By law OSHA is investigating the incident.

Garcia's family was joined by hundreds of friends and supporters at a vigil on February 11. They gathered to not only honor his memory, but to demand improvements in working conditions for all port drivers.

"The laws must be changed to protect these drivers," Hidalgo said. "Efrain Medrano had zero protections and no voice in the workplace. He had no chance in this industry against a company that routinely exploits workers in a race to the bottom."

"Pablo Antonio Garcia has been lost to us, but his example lives on. He knew the value of having protections in the workplace and we will honor his memory by continuing the fight for employee rights -- and the freedom to choose a union for all port drivers."

SOURCE International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Source: Hispanic PR Wire