


Crash Courses

WE NEED TO GET MORE TRUCKERS ON
THE ROADS FAST, BUT THERE'S A PROBLEM
WITH THE WAY THEY GET THERE

By Alana Semuels



Trucker Brita Nowak
heads down a highway
outside of Atlanta on
Feb. 5. Nowak owns and
operates her own big rig

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW HETHERINGTON FOR TIME

I

IN MOST STATES, ASPIRING BARBERS have to spend as many as 1,000 hours in training to get a license. To drive a 40,000-lb. truck, though, there's no minimum behind-the-wheel driving time required, no proof of ability to navigate through mountains, snow, or rain.

There's a multiple-choice written exam, a medical test, and a brief driving test—which in some states can be administered by the school that drivers have paid to train them.

As trucking companies hustle to hire more drivers in response to supply-chain issues, the roads may grow more dangerous. First-year drivers are involved in more crashes than other truckers, and putting more inexperienced ones on the roads could increase accident rates. The 5,005 fatalities from crashes involving large trucks in 2019 were a 43% increase from 2010, even though there were only 21% more trucks registered to be on the roads.

Yet as Canada's trucker protests against a COVID-19 vaccine mandate show, the global supply chain comes to a standstill without truck drivers. Automakers including Ford, General Motors, and Toyota curtailed production at U.S. and Canadian factories after the protests closed the Ambassador Bridge, which carries 27% of all trade between the two countries. Trucking associations warned that the vaccine mandate could further sideline more unvaccinated U.S. truckers.

But the demand for people to drive goods across the country is not going away, which is why the U.S. government is scrambling to get more truckers on the road. In the coming months, the minimum age to be licensed to drive commercial trucks interstate will drop from 21 to 18 for thousands of drivers as part of a pilot program announced by the Biden Administration. And on Feb. 7, standards for driver training that had been in the works for three decades finally took effect, but without a critical component: behind-the-wheel training.

"We don't want to do the hard things in this industry, which is spending extra money, taking extra time to train people to safely operate trucks," says Lewie Pugh, who owned and operated a truck for 22 years and is now executive vice president of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association. OOIDA has long pushed for higher training standards, which it says would help the high-turnover industry retain workers.

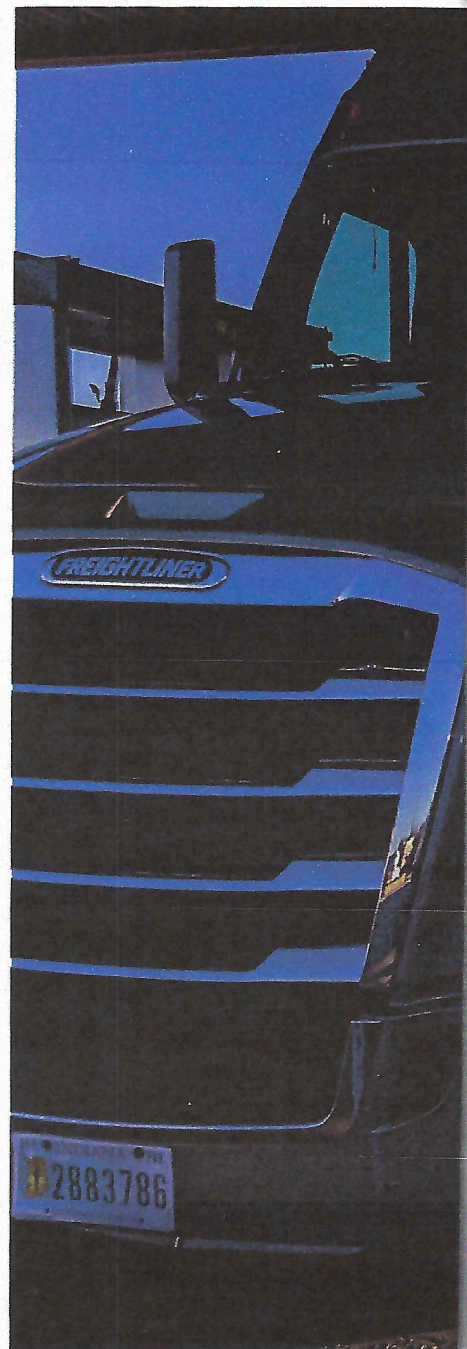
The consequences of inadequate training are most dramatic when big rigs crash into other vehicles. In Colorado in April 2019, four people were killed in a fiery crash when Rogel Aguilera-Mederos, an inexperienced driver, lost control of his truck.

Aguilera-Mederos, who was 23 at the time, had earned his commercial driver's license (CDL) in Texas, and was heading to Texas from Wyoming when his brakes failed coming down a mountain on I-70. He was sentenced to 110 years in prison for vehicular manslaughter, later reduced to 10 years by the Colorado governor. But the responsibility shouldn't lie only on the driver's shoulders, says his lawyer, James Colgan. "My client never received any formal training in mountain passes and how to deal with them," Colgan told me. The trucking company "let this inexperienced driver take a mountain pass—they actually encouraged it."

The company that hired Aguilera-Mederos, Castellano 03 Trucking LLC, has since gone out of business without being held accountable. Aguilera-Mederos had earned his CDL 11 months before the crash and his regular driver's license two years before that, according to court transcripts. He had been working for Castellano 03 Trucking for three weeks when he found himself barreling down a mountain at 80 m.p.h. with a 75,000-lb. load and no brakes. "I held

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—JAMES COLGAN, ATTORNEY



the steering wheel tight, and that's when I thought I was going to die," he told investigators.

CONCERNED WITH A HIGH LEVEL of truck-driver crashes, Congress in 1991 ordered the Federal Highway Administration to create training requirements for new drivers of commercial vehicles. But there still were no driving training requirements by 2012, when MAP-21, a law passed by Congress, mandated new standards.

In 2014, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA)—



the FHA's successor agency—brought together a committee to negotiate guidance for minimum training requirements. The panel came up with a list of recommendations, including at least 30 hours of training behind the wheel and some time driving on a public road.

The behind-the-wheel rules were opposed by only two members of the 25-member committee. Both represented lobbying groups for the trucking industry, which argued that there was no scientific evidence that behind-the-wheel training led to safer drivers, says Peter Kurdock, general counsel

Nowak, a longtime trucker, refuels outside of Atlanta while en route from Missouri to Florida

for the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, who was on the committee.

When the final rules were released in 2016, a minimum number of behind-the-wheel hours had been taken out. The FMCSA said that it was not able to find data proving the value of such training and that it did not want to impose extra training costs on proficient drivers. (In the same document, the agency

acknowledged that 38% of commercial-motor-vehicle drivers said they did not receive adequate entry-level training to safely drive a truck under all road and weather conditions, according to a 2015 survey from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.)

"That is some of the most invaluable experience that a new truck driver learns—sitting behind the wheel with someone who is an experienced driver saying, 'This is about to happen. This is how you avoid this critical safety situation,'" Kurdock says. "We feel it's a significant failing of the rule."

People seeking a commercial pilot's license, by contrast, have to have at least 250 hours of flight time; if they want to work for passenger airlines, they have to have 1,500 hours of flight time.

The advisory committee's recommendations created a training-provider registry and require would-be drivers to sign up with a school that is on the registry. But to be listed on the registry, schools are allowed to self-certify that they qualify. "What's actually changing?" the American Trucking Association asks, on a section of its website devoted to the new regulations. "For organizations that have a structured program in place today, the truth is—not much."

Colgan, the lawyer, blames the situation on money. More stringent training would skewer the economics of trucking, which ensures that the company that can charge the cheapest rates often gets the business. "It comes down to the almighty dollar—if you required truckers to be trained like that, it would slow everything down," he says.

If anything, there's a push to speed things up in the trucking industry as supply-chain issues create demand for more drivers to haul more stuff. On Feb. 2, the FMCSA said it would allow trucking schools in all states to administer the written portion of CDL tests for drivers in addition to the driving test, a reversal of previous guidance and one that could get more new drivers on the roads faster. In November 2021, 11 Republican Senators asked the FMCSA to let 18-year-olds obtain commercial driver's licenses for interstate trucking. "Inaction to grow America's pool of truck drivers threatens to drive up shipping expenses, prolong delays, and burden already-strained consumers with additional costs," they said in a letter.

Partly in response to that letter, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, signed by President Biden on Nov. 15, ordered the Secretary of Transportation to create a pilot apprenticeship program for 18-to-20-year-olds.

"Segments of the trucking industry have been pushing for teenage truckers to drive interstate for years, but the most recent supply-chain challenges are being used as a way to push forward that proposal," Cathy Chase, the president of the Advocates for

Highway and Auto Safety, told me.

THE PROBLEMS WITH TRAINING aren't just about a lack of standards. The first year that people spend driving a truck usually consists of long weeks on the road making low wages, a far cry from the six-figure salary and independent lifestyle pitched to new students.

Many newly licensed drivers drop out once they get a taste of that life. Over the course of four years, only 20% of the 25,796 drivers who started with CRST, a carrier that promised free training and a job afterward, finished the training and started driving independently, according to a class-action lawsuit filed in Massachusetts over the company's debt-collection practices. (CRST agreed to pay \$12.5 million to settle this lawsuit, although a former CRST driver has objected to the settlement and is still pursuing claims against the company.)

"What our current system of training does is, it throws people into the deep end with no support, into the absolute worst and toughest and most dangerous jobs, and just burns them out," says Steve Viscelli, a sociologist and the author of *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*.

Because new drivers are so expensive to insure, most get trained at big, long-haul trucking companies that are self-insured. These companies recruit would-be drivers by offering to pay for them to get their CDLs in exchange for a promise to work for the company once they're licensed.

Obtaining a CDL takes a few weeks. Only after that do most licensed drivers spend significant time on the road, when they're paired with more experienced

drivers who are supposed to show them the ropes. This saves the companies money, because federal regulations stipulate that truck drivers can only drive 11 hours straight after 10 hours off. Putting two drivers together lets one take the wheel while the other sleeps in the truck, enabling companies to move freight in half the time it would take a solo driver. Newly licensed drivers are paid cents per mile to haul loads, providing a major source of cheap labor.

But the system means that new drivers spend weeks sharing a truck with a stranger who has the upper hand in their relationship and the power to hurt their job prospects, because the trainer tells the company if the trainee is ready to drive on their own. Often, one person sleeps while the other drives, dimming prospects for the student to actually learn from the trainer. Some trainers barely have any more experience than the students.

This is done in tens of thousands of trucks across the country, and horror stories abound.

KAY CRAWFORD, a 25-year-old who signed up to become a truck driver during the pandemic after getting sick of the low pay and danger of being a sheriff's deputy, says she was sexually harassed numerous times by her trainers. One kept telling her he needed a woman and propositioned her; another refused to meet her anywhere but her hotel room. She says the company did nothing once she reported the incidents.

"The training coordinator said, 'I got you work, you're not accepting it, and I have 14 other students I need to get in a truck,'" she told me. After three separate bad experiences with trainers, Crawford decided to give up on trucking. She says she's still hounded by the school, which says she owes it \$6,000, despite her sexual-harassment claims.

"At that point, trucking pretty much disgusted me," she says. Despite having her CDL, Crawford says she can't get a new job because she's not insurable without long-haul trucking experience.

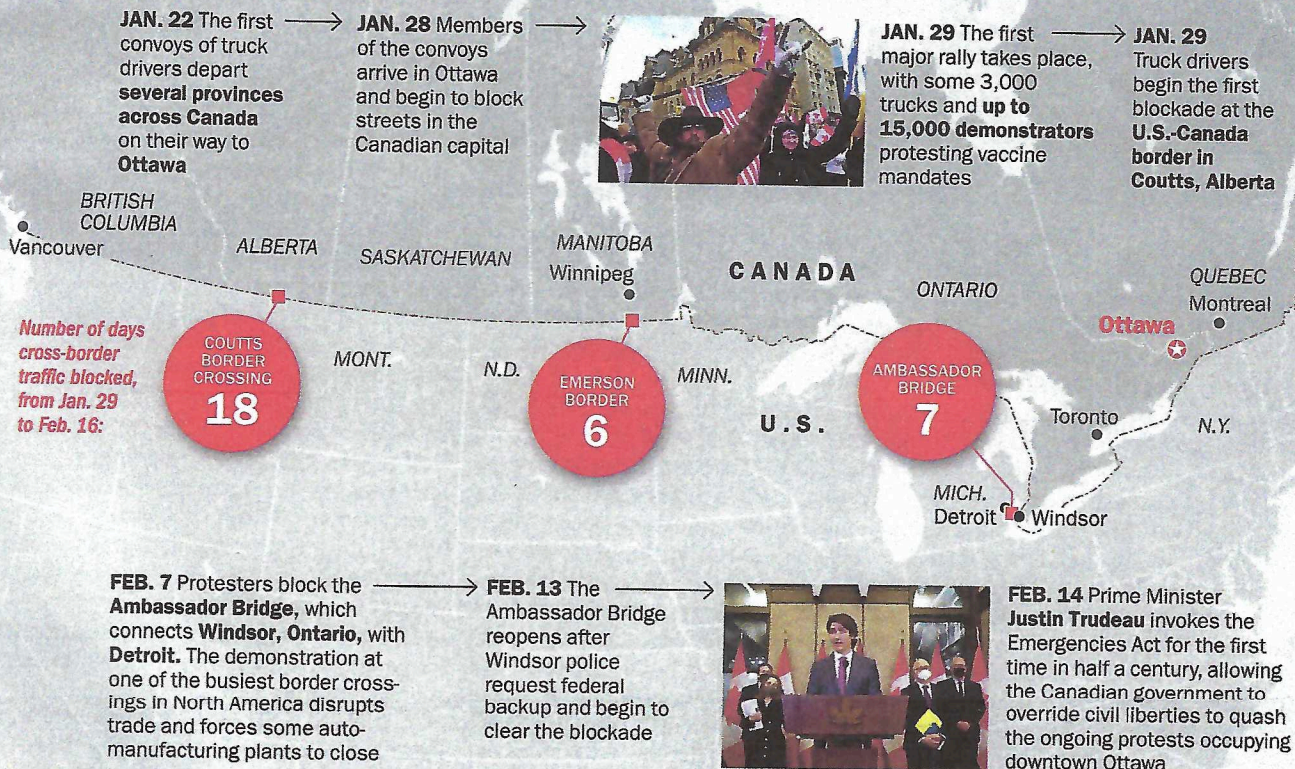
One CRST student alleged that her trainer raped her in the cab of her truck and the company then billed her \$9,000 for student-driver training; company employees testified that CRST only

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The chaos in Canada

It began as a demonstration against vaccine mandates for truck drivers. But in the weeks since the first "Freedom Convoy" left British Columbia for Ottawa, the protests have ballooned into an international phenomenon. The demonstrators' demands have grown beyond the truckers—90% of whom are already vaccinated—to a broader insistence that Canada end all COVID-19 restrictions. Up to 3,000 vehicles have paralyzed Canada's capital, shut down border crossings, impeded global trade, and disrupted operations at manufacturing plants. The occupation has drawn praise from right-wing supporters worldwide, spawned copycat protests from France to Australia, and generated more than \$9 million in donations, illustrating how the pandemic frustrations of fringe groups can mushroom into global movements. —Vera Bergengruen



considered sexual-assault claims to be valid if they were corroborated by a third party or recorded. The case, *Jane Doe v. CRST*, was settled last year, and though CRST agreed to pay \$5 million, it did not admit wrongdoing.

Despite dozens of legal battles like that one, training has changed little in the 21st century. (There is now a second *Jane Doe v. CRST* complaint making its way through the courts, filed by another woman who said she was sexually assaulted by her trainer.)

Brita Nowak, a longtime truck driver, says her trainer hit and slapped her

when she was on the road with a big carrier two decades ago; when she reported him, "they called me a pill" and asked for proof of the assault, she says. She didn't have any proof, so had to put up with the abuse until her trainer hit an overpass and damaged the truck; then the company switched her trainer.

Even some people who've had positive training experiences say they earn less than the minimum wage in their first year of trucking, which makes the sacrifices of being far from family for long periods of time even harder to bear. Crawford says she never made

more than \$500 a week; even in training, she spent long unpaid hours waiting to load or unload. The Massachusetts lawsuit against CRST alleged that new drivers made from \$0 to \$7.19 per hour between 2014 and 2015 because CRST deducted money from their paychecks for housing, physical exams, drug tests, and training reimbursement.

CRST did not respond to a request for comment.

"These are bad companies. I wouldn't send my worst enemy to them," says Desiree Wood, the founder and president of REAL Women in Trucking, which



Workers clear highway debris in Colorado after an April 25, 2019, truck crash that killed four people

advocates for better standards for drivers.

Hardly a week goes by on the REAL Women group's Facebook page without women complaining about trainers who aren't helping them master driving skills, or who are creating dangerous conditions on the road.

One woman, Memory Collins, told me that she was so exhausted from a lack of sleep two days into training that she felt unsafe driving. She pulled off the highway, only to find there was no place to safely stop. She woke her sleeping trainer, who helped her get back on the highway, but a week later, the company told her that a camera showed that she'd hit a car while trying to turn around. They fired her. When she called other companies to try to get hired, she was told she was too much of a liability.

"You have some people who come out of training and know how to drive; others come out of training not prepared, and know they're not prepared, and just hope they'll be OK," says Elaina Stanford, a truck driver who came up training through a big company.

Training wasn't always this way. Before the industry was deregulated in the late 1970s, trucking jobs were unionized, and even people starting out could have a good lifestyle. But after deregulation, Viscelli says, trucking firms needed more "cheap, compliant truckers" willing to work more hours for less money.

As more carriers got into trucking

post-deregulation, union rates fell, as did wages. Today, drivers get paid about 40% less than they did in the late 1970s, Viscelli says, but are twice as productive as they were then.

Before deregulation, new drivers were trained on the job by union members, and companies assumed workers would stay for decades. Now, truck-driver training has been turned into a "profit center" where companies make money off turnover, says Viscelli. Some new truck drivers get federal workforce-development money to pay for their tuition, which saves companies' having to cover training costs. Then, the companies pay the newly licensed drivers beginner rates, and when they quit because of the miserable conditions, the cycle is repeated. "They have figured out how to make that inexperienced, unsafe labor profitable," Viscelli says of the trucking companies. In 2020, local workforce boards in California invested \$11.7 million of federal money on truck-driver training schools, five times what they spent on driver training schools the year before.

The turnover rate at large fleets was 90% in 2020, meaning for every 100 jobs trucking companies needed to fill, they had to hire 190 drivers. At smaller

companies, called less-than-truckload, where drivers are often unionized and receive good benefits, the turnover rate over the same period was just 13%.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION says it is trying to improve training. Its Trucking Action Plan, announced in mid-December, launched a 90-day program that aims to work with carriers to create more registered apprenticeships in trucking. It's also specifically focusing on recruiting veterans into trucking.

Registered apprenticeships are the gold standard for workforce training and could improve trucker training, says Brent Parton, a senior adviser at the Labor Department overseeing the program. With a registered apprenticeship, would-be truckers get a guarantee that a trucking company will pay for their CDL and for on-the-road training, and also commit to wage increases over time. These types of programs do exist in trucking, mostly set up by unions like the Teamsters, which still can guarantee good jobs in trucking. The Teamsters have a program that holds truck-driver training on military installations, taking six weeks to help drivers get a CDL and learn to drive. They get union jobs with ABF Freight after they've completed the program, making more money than most entry-level drivers.

But most trucking companies don't have the time or money to invest in extensive training. The concern among advocates is that the new apprenticeships, including the program to license 18-to-20-year-olds to drive interstate commerce, will be akin to slapping a new label on the subpar training that exists. "We're hoping this isn't a title for what we're already doing," Pugh of OOIDA said.

The White House says its new program will be different, that this is the first step in creating trucking jobs people will want to keep for life. Advocates already have doubts. One of the first companies to sign up to work with the White House on its registered apprenticeships was CRST. In the past two years, CRST has agreed to pay at least \$17 million in settlements over lawsuits filed against it for wage theft—and for incidents that occurred while it was training people to become truckers. —With reporting by NIK POPLI