

Trucks keep rolling...for now

A small protest by truckers over fuel prices has limited impact as relatively few park their rigs. But companies see driver shortage ahead from rising diesel costs.

Truckers face gas pain



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NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- Despite a threatened strike by some independent truck drivers, many trucks were still on the road Tuesday. But for how much longer?

Several industry experts predict problems ahead finding drivers because of higher fuel costs.

Some independent truck drivers, known as owner-operators since they own their trucks, had talked about not working Tuesday to protest the rise in diesel prices.

And there were reports Tuesday of truckers on the New Jersey Turnpike snarling traffic by driving at only 20 miles per hour as a way to protest high gas prices.

But officials with the Owner-Operators Independent Drivers Association, which has about 160,000 members nationwide, as well as the Truckload Carriers Association, which represents trucking companies that use owner-operators, both said they had reports of only sporadic shutdowns by drivers.

"We've heard from a lot of members who have no intention of participating," said Norita Taylor, spokeswoman for the OOIDA. "What's more important is what happens tomorrow and the next day and next week if diesel prices don't go down. More and more truckers will be faced with decision about what to do, whether or not to stay in the business."

Gary Salisbury, the chief operating officer of Fikes Truck Line in Hope, Ark., which has about 500 owner-operators driving flatbed trucks, said he's seeing more and more of his owner operators quitting the business because they can't afford to keep running. Many have been forced to try to find a job as a company driver so they don't have to worry about paying for fuel and repair costs.

"I don't have any of my drivers who are striking, but we lost 12 trucks yesterday," said Salisbury. "Guys who have a mechanical problem, if they go down, they don't have the cash reserves to fix it and keep rolling."

However, Matt Turner, an Akron trucker who operates a Web site calling for a shutdown, <http://www.unitedcdl.org/>, said he believes there are thousands of owner-operators who are participating in the shutdown.

"The unity we've got now is getting stronger because of the corner we're backed into," he said. "The impact of this shutdown, we may not see until the middle of the week. But we'll see it."

Turner has parked four trucks that he owns. He usually drives one and pays other drivers to drive the remaining three.

Chris Burruss, president of the Truckload Carriers Association said his members are hearing chatter about the protest, but none reported more than scattered problems.

But he also agrees fuel prices are causing problems for both independent drivers as well as trucking companies. He thinks the rise in diesel costs will cause many smaller trucking companies to go out of business.

"We've always had a high turnover of drivers, but the turnover we're seeing now to a certain degree is not about jumping from one company to another to another. It's the drivers getting out because they can't afford to operate any longer," Burruss said. ■

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