

Barbara's Blog

Barbara Ehrenreich comments on working in America

April 07, 2008

Truckers Protest, the Resistance Begins

Until the beginning of this month, Americans seemed to have nothing to say about their ongoing economic ruin except, "Hit me! Please, hit me again!" You can take my house, but let me mow the lawn for you one more time before you repossess. Take my job and I'll just slink off somewhere out of sight. Oh, and take my health insurance too; I can always fall back on Advil.

Then, on April 1, in a wave of defiance, truck drivers began taking the strongest form of action they can take – inaction. Faced with \$4/gallon diesel fuel, they slowed down, shut down and started honking. On the New Jersey Turnpike, a convoy of trucks stretching "as far as the eye can see," according to a turnpike spokesman, drove at a glacial 20 mph. Outside of Chicago, they slowed and drove three abreast, blocking traffic and taking arrests. They jammed into Harrisburg PA; they slowed down the Port of Tampa where 50 rigs sat idle in protest. Near Buffalo, one driver told the press he was taking the week off "to pray for the economy."

The truckers who organized the protests – by CB radio and internet – have a specific goal: reducing the price of diesel fuel. They are owner-operators, meaning they are also businesspeople, and they can't break even with current fuel costs. They want the government to release its fuel reserves. They want an investigation into oil company profits and government subsidies of the oil companies. Of the drivers I talked to, all were acutely aware that the government had found, in the course of a weekend, \$30 billion to bail out Bear Stearns, while their own businesses are in a tailspin.

But the truckers' protests have ramifications far beyond the owner-operators' plight --first, because trucking is hardly a marginal business. You may imagine, here in the blogosphere, that everything important travels at the speed of pixels bouncing off of satellites, but 70 percent of the nation's goods – from Cheerios to Chapstick --travel by truck. We were able to survive a writers' strike, but a trucking strike would affect a lot more than your viewing options. As Donald Hayden, a Maine trucker put it to me: "If all the truckers decide to shut this country down, there's going to be nothing they can do about it."

More importantly, the activist truckers understand their protest to be part of a larger effort to "take back America," as one put it to me. "We continue to maintain this is not just about us," "JB"-- which is his CB handle and stands for the "Jake Brake" on large rigs-- told me from a rest stop in Virginia on his way to Florida. "It's about everybody – the homeowners, the construction workers, the elderly people who can't afford their heating bills... This is not the action of the truck drivers, but of the people." Hayden mentions his parents, ages 81 and 76, who've fought the Maine winter on a fixed income. Missouri-based driver Dan Little sees stores shutting down in his little town of Carrollton. "We're Americans," he tells me, "We built this country, and I'll be damned if I'm going to lie down and take this."

At least one of the truckers' tactics may be translatable to the foreclosure crisis. On March 29, Hayden surrendered three rigs to be repossessed by Daimler-Chrysler – only he did it publicly, with flair, right in front of the statehouse in Augusta. "Repossession is something people don't usually see," he says, and he wanted the state legislature to take notice. As he took the keys, the representative of Daimler-Chrysler said, according to Hayden, "I don't see why you couldn't make the payments." To which Hayden responded, "See, I have to pay for fuel and food, and I've eaten too many meals in my life to give *that* up."

Suppose homeowners were to start making their foreclosures into public events-- inviting the neighbors and the press, at least getting someone to camcord the children sitting disconsolately on the steps and the furniture spread out on the lawn. Maybe, for a nice dramatic touch, have the neighbors shower the bankers, when they arrive, with dollar bills and loose change, since those bankers never can seem to get enough.

But the larger message of the truckers' protest is about pride or, more humbly put, self-respect, which these men channel from their roots. Dan Little tells me, "My granddad said, and he was the smartest man I ever knew, 'If you don't stand up for yourself ain't nobody gonna stand up for you.'" Go to theamericandriver.com, run by JB and his brother in Texas, where you're greeted by a giant American flag, and you'll find – among the driving tips, weather info, and drivers' favorite photos –the entire Constitution and Declaration of Independence. "The last time we faced something as impacting on us," JB tells me, "There was a revolution."

The actions of the first week in April were just the beginning. There's talk of a protest in Indiana on the 18th, another in New York City, and a giant convergence of trucks on DC on the 28th. Who knows what it will all add up to? Already, according to JB, some of the big trucking companies are threatening to fire any of their employees who join the owner-operators' protests.

But at least we have one shining example of defiance of the face of economic assault. There comes a point, sooner or later, when

you stop scrambling around on all fours and, like JB and his fellow drivers all over the country, you finally stand up.

If you would like to help support the truckers in any way, go to

<http://www.theamericandriver.com/files/TruckersAndCitizensUnited.html>

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Comments

Countdown to a Meltdown, July 2005

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200507/fallows>

Posted by: rfranke | [April 07, 2008 at 12:00 PM](#)

rfrank, I have a subscription to The Atlantic and read that article sometime ago. I have been waiting for it to happen, and now we are there. The Atlantic published a cover article in May 2001 predicting where the USA's next war would be. They said Afghanistan. In Sept. 2001, it happened. We never learn from the past, and now we cannot even learn from 'the future'. Does not say much about the value of a Yale BA, and a Harvard MBA. So much for higher education!!!

Posted by: barbsright | [April 07, 2008 at 03:18 PM](#)

Well, why do the truckers seem to have more cojones than professional workers, who've been getting outsourced, laid off, downsized, etc. for years?

I guess this is why you started United Professionals, Barbara -- www.unitedprofessionals.org -- so maybe we white collar (and pink collar and who-knows-what-other color) workers will have a place to organize.

Even though I live in a small town with one grocery store -- just one truckload away from no bread or milk -- I applaud the truckers for their protests. Let's all stand up together!

Posted by: Buena | [April 07, 2008 at 04:27 PM](#)

Independent truckers have more cojones than professional and office workers because they are independent small businessmen and -women, whereas professionals mostly work in and for large institutions, generally corporations, and are used to taking orders and doing personally meaningless work. (See [_Dilbert_](#)) However, I think the protests are coming a bit late.

The big problem is that starting in the 1980s, the federal government began to inflate the money, not of everyone, but of the rich, through the generous granting of credit, the modern equivalent of printing money.

As long as this inflated money stayed up in the stratosphere of the stock markets, collectibles, and big real estate, the government could pretend there wasn't any inflation; the CPI explicitly excluded such items. This inflated money enabled the rich to live very well, since although it was inflated (that is, its value was small and shrinking) they had lots and lots of it due to the credit. The government and the big corporations could continue to borrow indefinitely large sums of money at very low interest rates.

However, this inflated money began to leak into the lower realm of real things, like gas at the gas station and food on the table. The money of the poor began to inflate and the CPI inevitably went up, no matter how many tricks were used to calculate it.

In an Adam-Smithian world, no one would lend money at a lower rate of interest than the rate of inflation. The credit money supply would contract and prices would level off or decline. But an Adam-Smithian world is an uncomfortable world.

Poor Bernanke, heir of Bubbles Greenspan, commissioned to carry on in the world as it is, did the prescribed thing: to reduce the inflation, he raised interest rates. But in doing so he changed the dynamics of the real estate market, setting off the current credit crisis. Bernanke then hastily dropped the interest rate to far below the rate of inflation, that is, he ordered the printing of more money and the throwing of it at banks and other interests of the important people.

Unfortunately for this happy plan, inflated money doesn't buy the same amount of real things that uninflated money does. A large component of the price of gas and diesel is not "peak oil" or the Indians suddenly starting to drive around, but the fact that the dollar is worth radically less than it was a few years ago.

There are two ways out of the present difficulty: either the inflated money of the housing and stock markets must contract and the prices of these things must go down; or the less-inflated money of the poor, the money of wages, food, gas, rent, clothes and so on must inflate. Either route will be difficult. Neither mainstream political party has come to grips with this difficulty; their main difference of opinion is not over whether money should be printed or not, but where to spread it around.

It remains to be seen whether the Chinese and other East Asians who have been funding America's most recent bender will continue to supply the necessary juice to keep the bender going. I rather doubt it, but who knows?

Sorry to be so lengthy; I guess I should start my own blog.

Posted by: [Anarcissie](#) | [April 07, 2008 at 09:43 PM](#)

The truckers did this in Belgium back in 2002 (or so ?) - not only did they blockade the highways out of Brussels during rushhour by driving 3-abreast but they also parked at key routes going in to the city. Brussels was a no-go zone for days on end. If your car was in you weren't getting out and vice versa... I supported them. Of course let's not even think about how much fuel has increased since then! :-)

Posted by: [Alexandra](#) | [April 08, 2008 at 03:43 AM](#)

Hmmm, I'll believe it when I see it. We Americans are awfully used to taking everything on the chin and with winter over, people now have a reprieve from heating bills for awhile. The timing seems off for a revolution. But maybe that's just my skewed perspective because I was able to pay my months-overdue utility bills last week.

I don't see people even cutting back on cable and cell phones yet, it's hard to imagine they'll magically develop the political consciousness to revolt and air the private shame of being not independently wealthy, publically.

Posted by: lc2 | [April 08, 2008 at 09:03 AM](#)

I'm reminded of a bit of folklore about farm foreclosures and auctions during the Depression. When a farm was to be sold because its owner couldn't pay his debts, the neighbours came in their trucks, with shotguns, and kept the bidding low enough for the property to be purchased by friends. In effect, the banks holding the notes had to accept what people were able to pay.

An I-wonder: The general strike, which we don't think of as part of America's heritage, might be a recourse if the people believe that November's election has been stolen from them.

Posted by: Judith Lindley | [April 08, 2008 at 09:16 AM](#)

Difference between truckers and professionals? As independent as truckers are, it has to be pretty extreme to join in protest. I've seen both worlds, and miss my aerodyne anteatr with the Series 60 oh-so-terribly, but now I'm having fun as an attorney fighting hare-brained nuclear, coal and transmission projects that utilities promote. Truckers are way different than professionals because professionals just show up. No professional has to pay \$2,500-3,000/month for their cubicle; keep up their license (i.e., don't get caught) despite the need to routinely violate the law just to make a living; professionals get to go home at night and truckers go off into a mobius strip while the rest of the world keeps on moving; professionals live on plastic and cash flow and truckers have to pay for their truck, fuel, insurance, lumpers, repairs NOW or it doesn't move and they're out of business.

It's clear we need to become more regionally focused, yet are professionals willing to give up strawberries in Minnesota in January? Do we need to send that package overnight? Should we get our clothing in containers from overseas or something made by our neighbors? Does meat come from CAFOs and downer cows? Are we ready to start dealing with our choices, making conscious choices, living sustainably? Are we ready to throw off the yoke/joke of consumerism and start taking on the obligations and responsibilities of being members of the human race? When you take away a trucker's ability to keep it rolling, this country will come to a stop. When trucks stop, it'll be too late for choices. We're on the edge...

Posted by: Carol Overland | [April 08, 2008 at 10:51 AM](#)

Find the comments great -- about showering the bankers with chump money -- just make it THIRTY dimes!

Posted by: Steve | [April 08, 2008 at 11:12 AM](#)

As the daughter and sister of truckers, I am the last person to want to see these noble and hardworking folks out of a job.

However. I have also been paying attention to the facts of peak oil and global warming, and our supply system is simply not sustainable. Biofuels are only taking food out of hungry people's mouths and putting it into gastanks. We have got to start thinking locally to produce our food and everything else we need. Burning 435 calories of fuel for each 5-calorie strawberry trucked from California to New York has GOT TO STOP. Wait for strawberry season, people. Or live on a burning planet. Your choice.

Posted by: Bobbi Dykema Katsanis | [April 08, 2008 at 12:31 PM](#)

So what \$4 a gallon of gasoline, that is still less than \$ 1 / ltr, in Holland it cost 1 ltr = € 1,55 , so that is € 7,00 per gallon !! Equivalent of \$ 14,00 per gallon in Holland. So Who is complaining and why ?!! Shamefull !

Posted by: W.v.d.Kuilen-Holland | [April 09, 2008 at 12:48 AM](#)

Hi,

I know a few truckers and applaud any actions they can take. I believe there is a partial solution to foreclosure on a truck. A reasonable technique that may be implemented is to protect your equity in a truck or house using a ucc-1 form and following this with a lien against the firm holding title. The ucc-1 would list your actual dollar investment in your house or truck or whatever. This is usually no longer a lien which is why you should check the lien process in your state. This action may put you in the first lien position in case you are foreclosed on or your property goes back to a dealer. This means that you would have to be paid your equity before the property could be resold by the credit company. You'd best check in your state as to what process works best - do it before foreclosure or loss of vehicle, then do your best to avoid either - but it could help you in the long run. Everything is commerce in this world, learn how to use it outside of the court or lawyer systems.

Posted by: WatcherJohn | [April 09, 2008 at 02:29 AM](#)

Here I am,

A small businessman just like the truckers. I own a plumbing business. I have seen steel prices go up, plastic prices go up, copper prices go up, my fuel prices go up. I drive a nice cube van, which eats the gas, health insurance can't afford anymore and on and on and on and on and on. I feel the truckers pain and will help you guys. Lets shut this country down until costs come drastically down. We can do this for all americans. I would love to speak out with you. I have much to say to those crooks at the fed and in Washington. HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL STARVE THIS WEEK, HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL LOSE THEIR HOMES, HOW MANY BUSINESSES WILL GO BANKRUPT, HOW MANY LIVES WILL BE DESTROYED DO TO THEIR GREED. The revolution has started lets begin in solidarity to take back this country back and end this slavery and corruption. I am a good public speaker and would like to help you in your cause because you are not the only ones affected by rising prices all across the board. Lets do it and we will be heard.

Respectfully,
John G. Igoe
The Happy Plumber

Posted by: John Igoe | [April 09, 2008 at 03:10 AM](#)

Wait until the average American consumer finds out just how easy it is to simply walk away from credit card debt.

Posted by: Alan Cabal | [April 09, 2008 at 03:15 AM](#)

WAKE UP America, it's not to late. Dr. RON PAUL is the answer to our collective salvation. He is Still in the race for the presidency. Vote for him in November even if you have to write him in. God Bless our Truckers and other like-minded Americans.

A Retired Trucker

Posted by: R.C. Taylor | [April 09, 2008 at 04:12 AM](#)

The inflationary pressures on fuel and food isn't unique to the US, and the whole world should stand up in solidarity with these truckers. I live in South Africa, and food and fuel prices are going through the roof. Our interest rates are still being hiked though, and people are generally very glum about the economic outlook. Here's to these brave individuals who are making a statement...the workers of the world are behind you!

Posted by: Permaculture Solutions | [April 09, 2008 at 04:33 AM](#)

We should all DEMAND that the oil companies be NATIONALIZED.

The truckers are right, the oil cartel has caused this, and their profits are obscene. But for the oil sector, we would not be spending trillions on wars for oil for them, and guarding them, and paying all that money to support their profits. They are stealing from us, not only our national reputation, but also our entire wealth. The oil sector has purposely excluded us from alternative energy sources, by buying up all the patents on alternative energy and sitting on them. Back in 1976, it was testified by experts to Congress that the oil sector had expanded ownership of all business between the ground, to the gas tank, having bought all the pipelines, distilleries, shipping, and all distribution of petrol. At that time, they were working on expanding horizontally, ie buying up all alternative energy patents and holding them from the public.

Ever wonder why you don't have solar lights for inside the house, or solar run vehicles? It is entirely possible, to have this NOW.

But, they plan on running us out on fake energy needs, at inflated prices.

They have the monopoly on energy, and it's time to end this.

The best way would be to take over these companies, and put them out of business.

Let the citizens push these evil war mongers towards providing free energy, by taking away their source of funds, and putting them out of commission.

Posted by: Truckers ROCK | [April 09, 2008 at 04:37 AM](#)

The best thing for the environment, road repair budgets, terrorism/accidents on our highways, all types of pollution and energy savings is to take the freight off the highways and put it back on the railroads where it belongs! A 30 fold savings in energy with big trucks off the roads, along with all the other positives, is never made public due to the truckers' union and industrys' power in the media and congress. A shameful situation indeed.

Posted by: Peggy Conroy | [April 09, 2008 at 05:03 AM](#)

Mr Putin has NATIONALISED the Oil companies who WRECKED such havoc on the Russian people who had their wealth STOLEN ...AMERICA SHOULD NATIONALISE these OIL COMPANY ROBBER BARRONS FORWITHTH.....

Posted by: Mr Putin Oil Company Nationaliser | [April 09, 2008 at 07:13 AM](#)

Regarding the complaint by W.v.d.Kuilen-Hollandthat Americans complaining about fuel prices are shameful, I recently spent six years living in Scandinavia and having also lived in California for a number of years, I consider myself to have a grasp of the economic and social systems underpinning the European and U.S systems. Basically, in most of Western Europe, the average person does reasonably well wage and benefits-wise due to active state involvement. Fuel prices may be high, but wages are high and the state takes care of most of the health care costs and the like.

In the U.S., it is all up to you. Wages and benefits for the average person is nothing like what it is in Europe, and reflecting that, the prices tend to lower for everything so that your low wage is usually workable. When global events dictate (or permit gouging) the increase of higher fuel prices at the pump, then the price of everything takes a disproportionate jump and there is not safety net. In Europe the state will step in, in the U.S. it is up to American ingenuity.

One more factor. The U.S. is a big place. A real big place. I have driven across the U.S. and my native Canada. For a European, it is impossible to imagine the vastness. For North Americans, it is impossible to imagine the closeness and confinement of the Netherlands.

Finally, we cannot make progress by declaring shame upon a group at the affect of some disparaging forces, we only make progress with compassion.

With Regards, George

Posted by: George in Vancouver | [April 09, 2008 at 07:33 AM](#)

If you have more and more people using more and more stuff, and the stuff is naturally of limited availability and quantity, then the stuff is going to become harder to get, that is, require more labor, that is, become more expensive.

Ain't no revolution going to change that.

Posted by: [Anarcissie](#) | [April 09, 2008 at 07:40 AM](#)

This is all because these lying, filthy, traitorous neocons have to protect Israel and keep the war going. That's the reason gas is so high, because of the tension in the middle east. With another war threatening to erupt at any moment, of course the price is high as supply may be disrupted.

Oh, and please don't talk about the 9/11 hoax. That was done by Israel and inside neocon traitors in the US govt., predominantly dual Israeli citizens.

Google 9/11 truth. Stand up to them like Jesse Ventura!

Posted by: [Pissed Off](#) | [April 09, 2008 at 07:42 AM](#)

I'm an old hippie, I'm all for grass-roots protests, but I'm having trouble getting my mind around this. I don't remember truckers being known as being especially liberal or reliably Democratic.

So they piss in the pot, voting for Republicans and Libertarians, and now they're complaining the soup tastes funny?

Can I look forward to newly chastened truckers joining me at anti-war protests and on the campaign trail for Democrats?

Posted by: [Born in The Bronx](#) | [April 09, 2008 at 08:08 AM](#)

Republicans are angry socialists and democrats are happy socialists; both are socialists, so saying one is a true alternative to the other is not only naive, it's downright ignorant. You should be supporting the truckers for standing up for themselves whereas suburbians will only grab their ankles and brace themselves. Berating them on which socialist party they should support is just plain stupid.

Posted by: [A. Magnus](#) | [April 09, 2008 at 09:00 AM](#)

....I,VE SEEN THIS PIECE OF SHIT MOVIE BEFORE.... AND OLD MAN REPUBLICANS IN THE WHITE HOUSE { PROVE ME WRONG PROVE ME WRONG } I BET THE RICH BITCHES ARE ALLREADY SALAVATING OVER THE PROSPECT OF A NATIONAL TRUCKERS STRIKE NEXT YEAR SO POPS MC CAIN CAN FIRE THEM ALL AND REPLACE THEM WITH NON UNION MEXICAN TRUCKDRIVERS WHO LL WORK FOR 75% LESS !

Posted by: [Bobby Decker](#) | [April 09, 2008 at 09:05 AM](#)